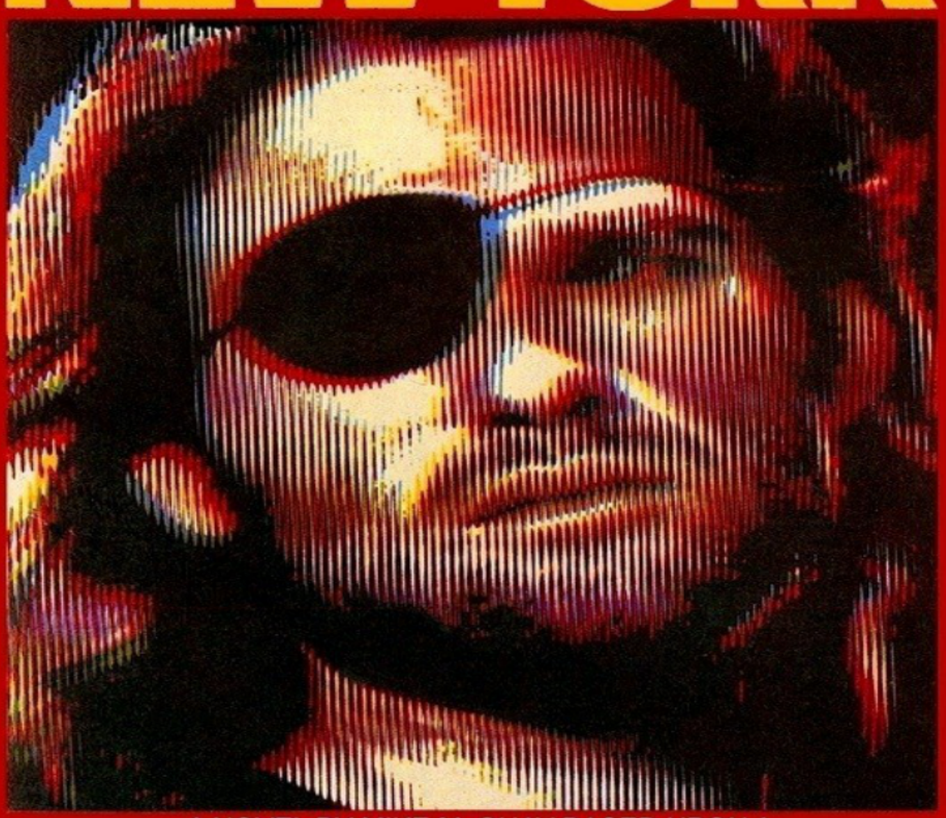
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ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK



A NOVEL BY MIKE McQUAY BASED UPON A SCREENPLAY BY JOHN CARPENTER & NICK CASTLE

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SUICIDE MISSION

"It's the *President* we're talking about," spat the Secretary. "Trapped in that hell-pit called New York. If we don't get him out, it could mean all-out war."

"What do you mean?" asked Hauk.

"There's a briefcase cuffed to his wrist that holds a cassette. The cassette talks about a powerful new bomb, a fusion bomb that . . ."

"Never mind," Hauk snapped. "How long have we got?"

"Less than twenty-four hours," the Secretary answered.

"We could never get in there with troops," said Hauk, pacing. "But *one* person could get in unnoticed."

"Who?"

"We've got a prisoner here name of Plissken. Snake Plissken."

JOHN CARPENTER'S

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

A DEBRA HILL PRODUCTION

Starring

KURT RUSSELL

LEE VAN CLEEF

ERNEST BORGNINE

DONALD PLEASENCE

ISAAC HAYES

HARRY DEAN STANTON as "Brain"

and

ADRIENNE BARBEAU as "Maggy"

Director of Photography

DEAN CUNDY

Production Designer

JOE ALVES

Written by

JOHN CARPENTER & **NICK CASTLE**

Produced by

LARRY FRANCO & **DEBRA HILL**

Directed by

JOHN CARPENTER

AN AVCO EMBASSY PICTURES Release

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

A Novel by
MIKE McQUAY

Based upon a screenplay by
JOHN CARPENTER &
NICK CASTLE



ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK
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For Karen,
who looks out for me.

ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK

I

BANK OF THE UNITED STATES
COLORADO FEDERAL RESERVE

October 21, 1997
3:35 P.M.

He was a cat. He was an iron bar fistload in a hard right hand. He was rough like a chisel and relentless as a jackhammer. He was Snake Plissken and he was running for all he was worth.

The hallway stretched out long and dark before him; neon script crawled the walls in patterns as complex as spider webs. Dizzying patterns. Insane patterns. Symptoms of the nerve gas madness that dipped out of the sky to touch everyone's life from time to time.

Plissken wasn't crazy, though.

He was motivated.

His feet slapped the fake marble floors, echoed hollowly back down the hallway behind him, and he pulled the blue satchel that he carried a little closer to his chest. Just a few minutes more. He was almost safe.

His bad eye throbbed under its black shiny patch; shooting tentacles of pain back through his head, inflaming his brain straight down through his spinal column. But that was okay; the pain was always there, reminding him, pulling his still-youthful face into a tight-lipped grimace that made most people leave him alone. And Snake Plissken liked that just fine.

The hallway branched off like a "T." Plissken hit the blank wall, arms up, and bounded off down the right fork. Then he heard sounds up ahead, and immediately slowed his pace, looking for cover.

He stopped, head darting, good eye straining against the blackness of the corridor. The sounds were getting closer. He caught sight of an open doorway ten paces ahead and approached it as quietly as he could.

He gave it a couple of seconds by the open space, listening. Hearing nothing human, he ducked inside. It was a computer room, webbed crazily with neon. Chirping, chattering machines piled the place full

like a maze. They clicked and whirred and worked their little hearts out

The room was a mausoleum, without life. It ran itself and left the flesh-and-blood folks out in the cold. The bank didn't mind the gas, or the war, or even Snake Plissken for that matter. The bank just went on, while everything else fell to pieces around it. It didn't care. It didn't give a holy goddamn in hell.

The noise in the corridor was very close. Plissken ducked down behind a market quotations teletype and held his breath. His brown maintenance uniform with COLORADO SOLAR stitched across the breast pocket was bunching tight around his neck. He tore open the top few snaps.

The sound was right by him. It seemed to be creaking, moving past his position. He stayed as flat as he could against the machine, only daring a look after the sound had gone past.

It was a trolley, a miniature, stainless steel trolley with speakers mounted on the side.

It began to talk: "Attention. Banking hours are over. Lock-up begins in thirty seconds. All personnel must leave the blue coded areas immediately. Thank you."

Plissken stood up, hugging his satchel to his chest once again, and watched the little machine chug off down the aisle and out a far door. The thing had a female voice, pleasant. Sexy. He waved to it as it went. He didn't worry about the message. It wasn't meant for him.

His hair was beginning to spill out from under the maintenance cap that completed his disguise. He stuck it back under, and moved quickly through the room, following in the wake of the trolley.

Once he was through the computer room, he found himself back in the hall. It was time to get going. He began looking for a man trap, his passkey to the outside.

He ran along the halls until he found one. Cold steel, it sat unornamented at the end of one hall. Dropping his satchel, Plissken leaned down and glared his good eye into the ID slot. Reaching into the pocket of his uniform, he pulled out a small screwdriver with the elongated tip that Bill Taylor called the Slotprick.

Looking once down the hall, he slipped the driver into the slot and the door sprang open. Stepping inside, he found himself in a small cubicle. The door slammed closed behind him. It had no slot on his side.

He turned to the other wall and found the other door. The pressure was building within him as he fumbled with the driver. But he didn't

mind the pressure. It made him feel real. Uncle had taught him about pressure at Leningrad, and now he had freon in his veins. Freon and anti-freeze. He was kept alive by a gut furnace of hatred that burned deep and steady inside, that was always pushing that pressure dial into the red, threatening to consume him at any second.

The driver found the terminal, and the door clicked open. Plissken stood there just long enough to make sure the hallway was clear, then he took off running. He didn't notice the tiny wall camera that followed his movements like a mongoose with a cobra.

He ran hard, lungs controlled, not yet winded. Light hazed at the end of the corridor. It was the fuzzy light of the main chamber that would usher him to the vators, then to the roof and freedom. He pumped a little harder.

Then the world came apart around him.

The lighting turned deep red, the color of blood, pulsing in unison with the throb of his bad eye. The alarm horns began clanging loudly, filling the hallway to monkey house clamor, jangling the senses.

Plissken didn't even slow down. He was locked on now, moving for the light, wishing he wasn't wearing that bulky uniform over his fatigues.

The hallway began to fill from the floor up with a light blue mist. Gas, always gas. Plissken covered his mouth and nose with his large hand and kept running.

The bells were pounding at him now, overpowering, trying to drive the thoughts right out of his mind. But he was Snake Plissken, and it would take more than a little sound and a little nerve gas to slow him down. It would take some big, mean son of a bitch with a riot gun at point blank range.

He broke through the hallway and into the lobby. Straight steel and glass, two stories tall, a cold and dead cocoon. There were cameras everywhere, and they all rotated to study him as he hurried through their domain—the chisel rough man with one eye just like them.

Tearing at the snaps of his disguise, Plissken raced toward the vators at the far end of the room. His teeth were clenched with the eye pain and the alarm sounds that stuffed his head full like a piñata. He skidded up to the vators, crashing into the one that had ROOF EXIT written across its sliding panels.

Punching the button, he threw the satchel in when the doors slid open. He jumped in after, already pulling the overalls off his shoulders.

The doors closed, toning down the alarm to a muffled clicking. He

hit the roof button and the machine started up. His breath was coming shallowly as he tore off the rest of the uniform and tossed it away from him onto the ground. He pulled off the cap and his hair sprang free, spilling almost down to his shoulders.

The floor indicator lights eased slowly up the wall grid. Plissken was tensed like a bowstring with the waiting, but he knew that he needed the time to get his breath back. He began to take in air more deeply, steeling himself, calming. He picked up the satchel from the floor and tucked it securely under his arm.

The vator shuddered to a stop. There was a second's pause. Then the door slid open to—blinding light!

Squinting, he charged through the opening. The first wave of heat hit him as soon as he was out of the vator's protective shell. He opened his eye full. The Colorado desert stretched out wide and empty all around him: yellow sand, reflecting afternoon heat, carpeting to the distant mountains.

The vator doors slammed shut behind him, and the sound made him start, spinning quickly. He went around full circle. No blackbellies. Good. The slash of his lips tightened into a grin.

The transfer station was set off to his left, its concrete pillbox shining hotly in the afternoon glare. The sun was stoking up good today, turning the gas-soaked atmosphere a pale shade of lavender.

Plissken broke for the station, the driver back out and ready in his hand. He kicked high as he ran, trying to keep his footing on the uneven ground. A fine spray of sand arced out from his feet with every step.

He turned once to glance back at the vator box, the only outward sign of the bank building beneath. No one was coming yet; he was still in good shape.

He got up to the massive bunker door and jammed the driver into the ID slot. Nothing.

"Damn," Plissken whispered.

He took it out and plunged it in again, jiggling the handle. It didn't budge.

"Come on, honey," he coaxed. "Just for me."

He looked back at the distant vator. The outer doors were beginning to slide open. He jerked his head back to the slot

Stepping back a pace, he took a deep breath then kicked out viciously with the heel of a jungle-booted foot. He forced the driver into the slot mechanism up to the handle. The machine sparked for a few seconds, then groaned open with a hydraulic hum.

Plissken moved inside and got the door shut just as the first blackbelly emerged from the bank vator. He hurried the heavy door closed, then jammed the driver into the space between the door and the frame to freeze it up.

Safe . . . for a while.

The inside of the transfer station was dark and cool. A soft blue illuminated arrow pointed down the stairs to the platform. Plissken navigated the stairs. They were glowing gently from the luminescence of several tiny wink lights inset within.

As he reached the bottom step, he could hear the blackbellies pounding on the outer door. They'd get through eventually, but it would take time. The transfer bunkers were designed to withstand assault

The platform was quiet and empty. It was lit to a soft yellow vapor haze and seemed to stretch out forever. Plissken walked easily across the concrete floor, moving for the destination panel.

The panel was set in an alcove near the foot of the stairs. He moved within and checked the big board. The lights moved sequentially across a stationary grid, and showed the closest hummers and their terminals.

There was a hummer moving on line to Eugene, Oregon, that would reach the station soon. He punched up those coordinates on the machine, then shoved the credit disc of one George Moropy into the slot. He had absolutely no intention of taking the Eugene hummer, but punched it up because that's what they'd figure him to do. The war was still being fought heavily in the west, which left a lot of badlands for people like Plissken to lose themselves in. And west he would go. But not right away.

After the Eugene transaction had rung up green on the viewer, Plissken punched up the Atlanta coordinates, and bought the trip with Lynda Millford's card. Bill Taylor was waiting in Atlanta, and he'd take care of their western connections.

Plissken moved back out on the platform, standing by the eastbound tubes. The tubes were thick plastic, nearly opaque. Occasionally a hummer would swish through, pinging on the internal tube rings, showing up on the outside as a speeding band of bright light. Then it would get quiet again. The tubes were a rich man's conveyance, and that very exclusive club got smaller and smaller all the time.

A hummer screeched to a stop on the other side of the platform, the westbound side. The Eugene express. Plissken turned to watch it. A section of the tube slid away and a pleasant but authoritative male voice said: "Eugene, Portland, Salem and points west. All aboard

please.”

There was silence for a minute, then the message was repeated. The hummer stayed around for a while longer, then the doors slid quietly closed and the machine pinged away. Plissken figured that the blackbellies would trace that one. He hoped that they’d leave the next one alone.

It wasn’t five minutes before the Atlanta transfer came along. Plissken boarded gratefully, and sat himself down in the soft, white “G” seat in his very own compartment. Plissken always traveled first class. He figured that Lynda Millford could afford it.

Quiet music drifted gently down from somewhere, and the computer spoke to him. “Going to Atlanta?” it asked.

“Yes,” he answered, leaning his head back against the seat “Atlanta.”

“Fasten your seatbelt please.”

Plissken fastened his seatbelt, but not too much.

“Oh, come now,” the machine said. “You can do better than that.”

Plissken did better.

“That’s good. Well be underway in a matter of seconds. After acceleration, can we get you a drink?”

Snake Plissken watched the wall close up around him. “Yes,” he replied. “A drink would be nice. Make it a double.”

II

IN THE TUBES

October 21
10:07 P.M.

Plissken had picked up the name Snake in the service, and it had stuck so hard that now there was nobody left alive on the face of the planet who knew his real first name.

He had been a hot shot college boy when they commissioned him as a lieutenant and sent him to the Russian front. Everyone had been real excited about the war when it first came around. It had been, after all, a long time since the last real confrontation and everyone needed to flex their ego muscles a little.

It had started small and built somewhere in the Middle East. It was the gradual build-up that somehow managed to keep the nukes out of it. There had been a conference in Stockholm early on, where the principal nations agreed to avoid the nuclear exchange to protect the nonaligned nations of the world. That was just a smoke screen, of course. In actuality, nobody wanted their shit blown away finally and completely.

So they decided on something else, something that sounded very harmless and sophisticated. They decided on chemicals. Plissken smiled when he thought about that. He was watching the contact points slide past his window, and trying to ignore the pain in his bad eye.

The chemicals were nasty. He supposed that there was no way of killing that wasn't nasty underneath it all, but the chemical clouds that continually floated in the atmosphere killed in slow motion. No one was untouched by them. They rolled in quietly, odorlessly and tastelessly, eating away bits of brain cells and nervous systems as they did. The chemicals made people crazy before they killed them. There were crazy people running around all over the place. Lots of them. Millions of them.

"Atlanta Station in five minutes," the computer voice said.

He pulled his hair back in some semblance of order and checked his

watch. A bit ahead of schedule. He looked down at the satchel on his lap.

They called him Snake because he had a knack for slithering out of trouble. He commanded a search and destroy squad that had the best record of success in the entire Russian campaign. No one could figure out why the Snake did so well; but the Snake knew. Some people built things with their hands. Others could compose beautiful music or had a head for figures. Snake Plissken had a talent for making war. It was in his blood.

"Atlanta Station," chimed the voice. "Thank you for tubing with us."

The compartment roared around him, and the rush of decel strained him forward against the straps. The thing stopped with a slight jerk, and Plissken was out of his belt and standing before the tube hatched open.

When the wall section slid away, he stepped right out onto the platform, looking back and forth. No one. No blackbellies. No nothing.

He didn't realize that he had been holding his breath until the air rushed out of him. He smiled and went looking for Taylor.

Taylor had been with him that morning in the CO's office in Helsinki when they first heard of the so-called "Leningrad Ruse." It was early, bleak fall and the low, rolling gray clouds, distended with gas, were dropping a lethal acid rain onto ground already barren and dead from floating poisons. They were forced to go around for weeks at a time in their gas gear, speaking to one another through mikes in their masks.

So it was on that morning when they stood in a tiny office with a man from Special Projects named Captain Berrigan. At least, that's what he said his name was. Berrigan never took off his mask, not even in the relative safety of that secured bunker. Plissken had always thought that to be a shame, for he never got to see what the man looked like; and he had thought for a long time that he would certainly have liked to find Captain Berrigan and gut him with his buck knife.

He walked a good pace through the deserted spoke of the terminal. After a time, he began seeing people. There weren't very many, but there were still enough to make him feel safe and normal.

The spoke terminated in an escalator. He took it down to the main lobby, where most of the arriving and departing passengers were milling about, feeling secure in their sheer numbers. There was some Security around the tv lounges and rows of food and drink machines, but they were there to protect the property, not mess with the karma. Plissken walked easily, just one of the folks.

He caught sight of a sign on a concrete wall. PACIFIC EXPRESS, it said, and pointed down a corridor. He followed the arrow. That's where he'd find Taylor.

Captain Berrigan had told them that one of the Allies' top Intelligence officers had been taken prisoner by the Ruskies and was being detained in Leningrad. He said that they had to go in and get him out before the man revealed secrets vital to the entire war effort. Plissken's squad had been especially picked because of their phenomenal record. It was a great honor.

Neither he nor Taylor thought much of the plan; it sounded too much like suicide. But duty was duty. So early the nest morning, they went low over the Baltic Sea and hit Leningrad with the sun. There were fifty of them in Gulffire gliders screaming in at rooftop level, while air support drew fire on the east side of the city.

Leningrad was the Ruskie supply point, and was consequently the most heavily defended city in western Russia. Plissken and his people flew into the maelstrom, and it was far worse than any human mind could possibly imagine. He remembered it mostly as oranges—burning, sizzling oranges—screaming fire flowers.

Success was impossible. Survival nearly so. When it was clear to Plissken that they couldn't get the man out, they plastic charged the building that he was being held in and buried him under five hundred tons of rock and plaster.

Sometime during the fighting a frag cracked Plissken's left goggle, and the nerve gas went to work on his eye. Somehow he ordered the withdrawal and got back to base. It was like his whole head was on fire, bright orange fire. When the gliders touched down again, there were only two of them left. Just two.

He spent a month in the hospital before they even let Taylor come visit. The man was in a leg cast; his knee had been shattered in a crash landing getting back into Helsinki. He was pale like an albino when he came in, and his eyes were just as red.

"It was all a trick," Taylor said to him there in that sterile hospital room. "A lousy, fuckin' trick."

It turned out that the "Intelligence officer" was actually a corporal in masquerade who let himself be captured to give false information. Plissken's squad had been sent in just to lend the whole thing an air of authenticity. To make matters worse, it didn't work. The man hadn't fooled them for a minute.

Snake Plissken's life began to change at that exact instant.

The PACIFIC EXPRESS spoke was completely deserted. Nobody in his right mind went west. Nobody but crazy men and outlaws. He kept moving until he came to another escalator, then started down to the subway platform.

He hit bottom and moved through semidarkness. He saw Taylor just ahead, crouched down by the wall. Plissken moved silently up to him. The man was small, with darting eyes and a weak face. He wasn't weak, though, just put upon. He wore a cap and fatigue jacket that still bore the stitch marks on the sleeve to show where the sergeant's stripes used to be. His hands were lost up to the wrists in the wiring of a terminal box that was set into the wall.

"How are you, Sarge?" Plissken asked when he got up close.

Taylor didn't even flinch. "Surviving," he replied, then his eyes drifted up to Plissken's. They shared a look, then the eyes drifted down to the satchel in Plissken's hand. Taylor had the bag's twin beside him on the floor.

"You're early," the little man said,

"They're on my ass."

Taylor nodded once and turned back to the panel, cursing softly to himself. He worked quickly, expertly. All at once, he sat back with a grunt. "That's it," he said.

His words were followed by the clank of a subway train moving down the platform. It got right next to them, then wheezed to a stop.

"Let's go," Plissken said, and started for the train. Taylor got to his feet and followed, his bad leg making him limp slightly.

They got inside just as the door was closing. The car was old. The garish neon lit the torn seats and dirty, battered walls to an odd sort of antisepticness.

The train started away, creaking loudly. Plissken and Taylor grabbed seat frames to bolster them against the acceleration. Snake smiled as the speed built. They were off.

"We wired in to Seattle?" he asked.

Taylor twisted up his mouth. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe Seattle, maybe San Francisco, maybe Barstow." He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't tell, you know? Those goddamn circuits are so small."

Plissken tossed his satchel to Taylor and slumped down in a seat, his eyes drifting to the window, exhaustion spreading over his body like a shroud over a corpse. When he looked back around, Taylor was zipping open the bag.

"Congratulations," Plissken said. "You're a billionaire."

Taylor was pulling plastic white credit cards out of the sack. "Jesus, Snake." He began reading out loud, "Master, US National Bank. Master, US Port Authority. Master, US Tobacco Reserve." He shoved the open satchel toward Plissken. "Will you *look* at this?"

Plissken folded his hands and leaned way back in the seat "You look at it I'm tired."

"Come on, man. We gotta split it up."

"I trust you."

He watched as Taylor unzipped the other bag and started shoveling the credit discs into it. Then he closed his eyes and fell asleep. He dreamed about his head being on fire. Orange fire. Just like every night.

He awoke to Taylor shaking him gently on the arm. "Wake up, Snake. We're there."

Plissken came awake at once, alert, like an animal. He sat up straight, eye searching, brain clear—except for the pain.

His first word was, "What?"

Taylor had backed away from him. He had been around Plissken long enough to know that sometimes the Snake came awake defensively, violently. It had to do with his eye.

"The train's slowing down, Lieutenant. We're there."

"Where?"

"Wherever."

Plissken stretched quickly and watched them slowing to the terminal platform. All terminals looked the same. There was no way of telling where they were just from looking.

He stood when the train came to a complete stop. Taylor was already standing by the door. It slid open.

"Welcome to San Francisco," the computer voice said. "Please step to your right"

Good citizens, Plissken and Taylor stepped out of the car and walked casually toward the escalators on their right

"Well, it ain't Seattle," Taylor frowned. "But it's close."

"Close enough for government work," Plissken said.

Taylor thought about that for a moment, then a big toothy grin consumed his drawn face. "San Francisco ain't bad," he said. "I can spend a billion here."

They got on the escalator and took the ride.

"San Francisco," Taylor said again, shaking his head. "Sure couldn't

spend it in Barstow."

"Yeah," Plissken responded, but he wasn't really listening. He was feeling the hairs on the back of his neck bristling. It felt bad. It felt all wrong. He began craning his head around as the moving stairs neared the upper lobby, trying to reassure himself.

"What's wrong?" Taylor asked.

Plissken shook his head, lips tight "Something . . ." he started, then trailed off.

They got off the escalator. The lobby was totally deserted, not anything like the main lobby in the Atlanta terminal. There wasn't even any Security here. They started walking across it, Plissken still glancing around.

Taylor slapped him on the shoulder. "Take it easy, Snake," he said. "It's four in the morning, man. Stop worrying. We made it."

Plissken had about a second to appreciate the wisdom of that remark before the air exploded around them. There were sounds of automatic rifle fire, then Taylor spun off screaming, going for the floor which was coming apart in chunks around them.

Plissken went down with him, holding him. The man's left arm had been chewed to pieces. He lay there, cursing through clenched teeth, his fatigue jacket already dyed red, blood-soaked, dripping in an evergrowing pool on the cement floor.

"God, Snake," he rasped. "God . . . DAMN!"

Plissken tried to pull him to his feet. "Come on!" He looked across to the far side escalators. Blackbellies were spread across the escalator bank one floor up and were coming down. Kevlarred killers, crazies with badges. They carried AR-15s, up and ready. Black riot helmets with darkened visors covered their heads. The devil in black times six.

"Come on!"

He got the man onto his feet, but Taylor was already in bad shape. When he looked at Plissken, there was resignation in his face, resignation that hadn't been there even in Leningrad.

They ran back the way they had come, and the guns started chattering again behind them. Taylor fell behind, blood loss and the bum leg taking their toll.

Plissken bounded down the escalator, and started eating up the platform in great leaping strides. He turned once to make sure that Taylor was all right. The little man was nowhere to be seen.

He slowed, then stopped. He looked back for Taylor, then turned to stare down the long platform that could mean escape.

He turned back. “Taylor!” he called. “Taylor!”

Taylor wasn’t coming, he knew that. He also knew that there was nothing he could do about it. Turning, he looked once more down the length of the platform. His instincts told him to run. But Taylor was all he had left. They were all gone, everyone else who knew Snake Plissken as a real human being. All dead.

He sighed once, then trotted back to the escalators and up. He reached the top. Taylor was on his belly on the floor, crawling, leaving a bloody trail behind him like a snail’s. The blackbellies, rifles ready, moved slowly in on him. They were drawing it out, teasing, giving him that last look at daylight.

Plissken felt his stomach muscles tighten. He hated blackbellies, hated the stench of death that rolled off them like fog off the marshes. He dropped his satchel on the floor and raised his hands.

Rifles came up to cover him. “Drop the bag, Taylor,” he said.

The man looked up, tore into him with pleading eyes. He clutched the now bloody satchel tighter and kept moving, sliding through his own gore. “Go on, Lieutenant,” he rasped, and his voice was like an old man’s. “Go on.”

Plissken’s eyes jumped back and forth between Taylor and the blackbellies. He could see them vibrating, smelling the blood and wanting more. He spoke slowly, nonthreatening, emphasizing each word. “Drop the bag, Taylor.”

The man opened his mouth to speak, but the words never came. One of the gunmen opened fire on the little man, and the others started in right after. Taylor’s body jumped and twitched the death dance as the troopers, one by one, emptied their rifles into him. It was quite a show. They were all very pleased.

Plissken just stared as they moved in to grab him. When Taylor died, he took a good chunk of Snake Plissken with him. He was all alone then, and for once, the grief was enough to push the pain out of his head.

They grabbed him, jerking his arms roughly behind his back to shackle him. He didn’t mind the pain, though. There were worse things.

III

MANHATTAN ISLAND

October 23
7:30 P.M.

Bob Hauk let the sound of the copter blades mesmerize him as he stared out through the bubble at the churning black waters of the Hudson below.

It was going to rain; the air just reeked of it, but Meteorology told them that there was no gas in these clouds. They said that it would be a clean rain. The people at Meteorology were notorious liars.

They used to call him Big Bob when he was in the service. But that was a long time ago, back when there had been a spark within him. Back before the craziness. Now they just called him Hauk, and it was just the way he should be called.

He had once been a leader of men, a lover of people and a believer in ideals. Now he presided over the largest asylum in the history of the world. Now he sat in a chair and put his time in, counting off the days until he died. It was as worthwhile an occupation as he could think of. He had been hard once, hard and lean. But that was all decaying slowly to fat. His eyes were still commanding, though. He hadn't lost that. They were ice blue and as direct as armor-piercing shells.

The radio squawked beside him, and he jerked his head to stare at it. The pilot reached out and juiced it. "Yeah," he said.

"Gotham 4. This is Control. Do you read? Over."

"Got you covered. Control. Go ahead. Over."

Hauk continued to stare at the radio, almost as if it were a living thing talking to him there in the pale red light of the instruments. He shook his head and turned back to the window. Maybe the gas was affecting him, too.

"We have a radar blip in North Bay, section seventeen. Object moving toward the Jersey Wall. Can you check it out? Over."

"Negative, Control," the pilot said in a monotone. He wore his black helmet with the visor up to reveal his face. The tiny microphone bent

around the side of the helmet, right up to his mouth. “I have Commissioner Hauk on board, and we are enroute to Headquarters.”

Hauk raised his hand without turning from the window and waved that off.

“Control. This is Gotham 4 again,” the pilot said, and he had an edge of excitement to his voice that made Hauk’s stomach turn. “The Commissioner gave me the go ahead. I am in pursuit of the bogey. Over.”

The chopper tilted forty-five degrees to curl back toward the city and for several seconds, Hauk found himself staring into the heart of the low-hanging cloud bank that the liars in Meteorology said contained no gas. Then they leveled off and came in at skyscraper level over the remnants of the west side elevated near Battery Park.

It had once been called New York City but that, like Hauk’s fortitude, had been before the craziness. Now it was the New York Maximum Security Penitentiary and it held three million killers, cutthroats, thieves and lunatics.

And Bob Hauk, God help him, was in charge.

He let his eyes drift over the corpse of the city. It was a blackened shell, a concrete forest of dead, towering trees. Its lifeless towers stretched like monstrous tombstones into the heart of the black night. Occasional fires flickered below him; the animals who now controlled those dead streets were playing out the disease that ruled their minds. But soon it would be winter, and the animals would grow a lot fewer in number. Hauk figured that couldn’t help but be a good thing.

New York City had been the first North American target in the war. It was under siege for three full weeks with fire bombs and gas. When it was over, those who were left alive were crazy. They roamed the streets in large packs, desecrating and cannibalizing what bodies they found. What remains there were got piled in layers up and down Wall Street, and that section of town became known as the boneyard,

Hauk looked over at his pilot. The man was staring intently at his small radar screen, his jaw muscles clenching and unclenching in anticipation. All at once, a tiny light appeared on the screen, flashing brightly each time the sweep passed its position.

“All right,” the pilot sighed, low and sexual. He started breathing heavily, his tongue flicking out to lick dry lips.

Hauk turned away from the man, staring once more at the city. He hated to look at it, hated everything about it. He hated the fates that put him there to begin with.

The war went on, and so did the gas. As the years slipped by, the American economy went to pieces. There were a lot of poor people, who were going crazy with gas madness. To survive they turned to crime. The crime rate doubled, then redoubled and quadrupled as crazies took to the streets, looting and burning—destroying everything that they came in contact with.

And as the wars continued overseas, the soldiers slowly went crazy. The Army, though, had learned to channel the insanity into battle fury. The trouble was, the boys were starting to come home after years on the front with no way to direct their madness.

Then someone had a bright idea. The United States Police Force was formed, its ranks filled exclusively with veterans with a taste for blood. Their uniforms were black, just like their minds. Their justice was swift and fiery.

They took to the streets, trained to mayhem, and fought the urban wars with clipped military precision. When they were done, millions lay dead. Those unlucky enough to be left alive were herded onto Manhattan Island. It was big enough, and uninhabited by anyone sane, and its rivers formed a natural barricade.

They were back over the churning waters again. The pilot was chuckling low. He had the blip centered on his radar screen.

He spoke into his mouthpiece. “North Bay, section seventeen. Object ahead.”

Hauk, from reflex, began looking down, his keen eyes scanning the surface. The copter dipped and began circling, the spiral getting lower and lower, threading the needle.

The pilot flipped on a spot. It stabbed the blackness with an eerie blue shaft of light. Hauk caught sight of the thing on the water before the pilot, but he didn’t say anything. It didn’t matter.

The searchlight found the object soon enough. It was a crude raft of rot wood and telephone poles lashed together. Two thin, tattered prisoners were atop it. They were paddling desperately toward the Jersey Wall. They looked up, startled, when the light found them. But then they went back to their paddling, hurrying the pace even faster.

The pilot’s gloved hand found the toggle for the backfires, and he gently caressed the little knob.

“Got you now,” he said huskily. “Dead meat.”

Hauk reached out and touched the hand on the toggle. The man looked over at him. His face was lined with anger. Hauk gave the look right back to him.

“A warning,” Hauk said. “Give them a warning first”

The man tightened his lips, but didn’t say anything. Moving his hand away from the missiles, he activated the loudspeakers instead.

“You have ten seconds to turn around,” he said, and the words roared out of the external speakers like thunder. “Start back to the penitentiary.”

The prisoners didn’t listen, of course. Hauk knew they wouldn’t. They were crazy anyway.

The pilot put his hand back on the toggle, then looked to Hauk. The Commissioner took a breath, then nodded. The grin came back to the man’s face immediately. He was easy to please. Just give him something to kill.

He got the raft directly below the chopper, then flicked the toggle. There was a whoosh and the copter shuddered. Hauk watched the tracers from the two missiles zig-zag down to the water.

The explosions ripped the night to shreds, ripped away the cover of darkness to reveal the festering heat beneath. When the white hot flashes faded away there was nothing left of the two men and the raft except churning, crackling water.

“Good shooting,” Hauk said without conviction.

The pilot bobbed his head proudly and turned the copter toward Liberty Island. “Control,” he said into his mouthpiece, trying to make his voice sound casual. “Attempted prisoner break has been terminated. Over.”

The voice came back excited. “Nice work, Gotham 4. Is that you, Charly? Over.”

“Yeah, it’s me,” the pilot answered. “And I’ve bagged seventeen. Another month and I’ll have a gold badge.”

“I believe it’s eighteen, Charly,” the static-filled voice returned. “I think you’ve got eighteen.”

“I think you’re right. I think it is eighteen.”

“Well, congratulations. And keep up the good work. Over. Out.”

They were coming up on the Statue of Liberty, command post for the USPF control of the Manhattan prison. The whole island was heavily fortified with artillery and great stone bunkers topped by rolls of barbed wire.

They came in close, right past the great lady’s face. The interior of the crown was brightly lit, and Hauk could see movement within. People manning machines, gazing out the windows with huge binoculars up to their faces. Machinery. *Lots* of machinery. They flew

under the beam of the power searchlights that were set atop the torch. The beam was wide angle, and raked the waters below in long, sweeping patterns.

The landing pad was on the Jersey side of the Statue, right beside the huge wall that they had erected connecting liberty Island with the New Jersey shore.

The wall loomed large beside them as they floated down to the big yellow “X” of a landing zone. It rose far into the sky, its top filled with a long row of red lights that continually flashed a pulsebeat rhythm on and off, on and off.

Troop bunkers were built into the base of the wall and when they got close, Hauk could see black-suited cops drifting in and out of the stone canyons.

Hauk hated the prison, and he hated the killers who called themselves cops. He never came down here unless there was a damn good reason. Tonight he had a reason. Tonight he had come down to meet someone special. Tonight he had come down to meet Snake Plissken.

IV

LIBERTY ISLAND IN-PROCESSING

October 23
7:45 P.M.

The inside of the van was dark like a cave. It was all steel inside, cold and slick. It was going to rain; Plissken could feel it in his eye. But he couldn't tell otherwise, for he was completely closed in—no light, no warmth and only the air that had been locked in there with him.

They had been riding for a long time, and the suspension on the truck was so bad that Plissken was bruised all over from the jolts. He would have slept since he needed the rest, but the continual bouncing plus the heavy chains they had manacled him down with made it impossible.

They had taken him out of the San Francisco Station, just leaving Taylor's body there for whatever the Fates had in store for it. They never talked to him, except for the occasional exclamation of a rifle butt across his back or head. But it didn't matter. He knew what was in store for him.

They put him on a hummer and he traveled, coach this time, all the way back to New Jersey. Then they put him in the back of the truck and started driving. Nobody wanted him any longer than they had to have him, for Snake Plissken had a reputation of being slippery. It would have been a lot easier to amply kill him the way they did Taylor, but catching the most wanted criminal in the country alive was a miracle to everyone concerned. They were extremely happy to have Snake, but only for a little while.

There was no trial, of course. Trials had gone out with the USPF. With so much crime and so little money, the country simply didn't have the machinery or inclination to deal with a legal system. The blackbellies were the legal system—judge, jury and in more cases than not, executioner.

They were sending him to New York. He knew it as soon as they punched up the coordinates to New Jersey way out in San Francisco.

The van stopped moving. He got slowly to his feet, having to work

around the chains that ran from his wrists down to his ankles. The ceiling of the truck was lower than his height, so he was forced to stoop. He moved close to the door, ready to kick out and make a bid for freedom if the opportunity arose.

He heard voices outside, but the walls of the van made it impossible to tell what they were saying. Then the door came open.

There were guards, and they all had rifles. All of the rifles were pointing at him.

"Have you heard the one about the traveling salesman?" he asked, and then they were grabbing, pulling him through the opening to fall on the hard ground.

He went down, the fall knocking the wind out of him. Rolling onto his back, he was staring up at black night clouds. A helicopter was passing by just overhead. It feathered down on a landing pad not a hundred feet from him.

The blackbellies pulled him to his feet and led him toward the bunkers set into the great wall. Behind him stood the Statue, grim and massive, pulling silent sentry duty over the fortress of New York, her search-beams stinging the night in long, melancholy streamers.

The bunkers were blank and unimaginative, and stretched out the entire length of the wall. Radar scanners revolved slowly on their roofs. Plissken was taken toward a door. Above it, a sign read: LIBERTY ISLAND SECURITY CONTROL.

They shoved him through the door to stand in a long hallway. There were more signs on the walls, huge signs.

PRISONERS: NO TALKING
NO SMOKING
FOLLOW THE RED LINE

The red line was painted, none too neatly, right onto the floor.

"Go on," a voice behind him barked, then he was shoved from the back.

He followed the red line, hoping that it would take him to the pot of gold. He ended up at a guard station. A duty Sergeant with a flabby face and two fleshy cracks for eyes looked up at him.

"Hold up," the Sergeant said, his eyes drifting down to the clutter on his desk.

Plissken stopped walking, a look of disgust on his face. He was in the midst of blackbelly heaven and it made him feel dirty.

The duty Sergeant was idly flipping through a stack of manila folders, his mouth moving wordlessly. Then he found what he wanted and stopped.

"Mister Snake Plissken," he said without inflection.

The other guards suddenly came awake, eyes wide, staring at Plissken. They took the safety catches off their rifles and held them a little tighter, a little steadier. Snake shook his head. He wasn't going anywhere. At least not right away.

"How are you tonight, Plissken?" the man with the folder asked.

"Fabulous," Plissken responded, and his words were as dead as Bill Taylor.

The man smiled, showing rotted teeth. "Not for long," he purred.

A gun was jammed into Plissken's back, pushing him on down the hall. He shuffled on, his chains chinking along the stone floor as he moved.

He was heading toward a doorway. It was the kind of doorway that could lead straight to hell. There was a sign above the doorway, neatly stenciled in blood red letters. It read:

GOODBYE, CHARLIE
DON'T THINK IT HASN'T
BEEN FUN

He hesitated for only a second before they shoved him into the blackness within.

Hauk had never met Snake Plissken, but he knew about him. He had been Lieutenant Plissken then. Names change to fit circumstances. Hauk had been Big Bob then, and sometimes, Colonel Hauk.

He shared a heritage with Plissken. It was a heritage called Leningrad. When Plissken's men were storming the city that cold, ugly sunrise, Hauk had been leading a squadron of slant wings on the eastern, industrial section of town. They were drawing fire. And they drew one hell of a lot. They drew enough fire to burn up the world.

Hauk wore a tiny gold earring in his right ear. In another century, sailors used to set earrings like his to show that they had survived a shipwreck. *That's* what Colonel Big Bob Hauk thought about Leningrad. And he wanted to meet Plissken, just once. Wanted to tell him that he understood.

The copter touched down, and he watched some guards leading a

chained man past him to the holding area. He started to follow the figure with his eyes, but something else caught his attention.

Someone was running toward him. It was the Section Commander, Rehme.

He climbed out of the chopper without a word to the pilot. He was wearing his dark suit and tie, which fit his mood. His nickel-plated .38 with the pearl handle rode snugly on his hip. He never came to New York without a gun. Never.

He bent down under the bite of the props, the machine-generated wind whipping his face and hair. Rehme stoop-ran right up to him and began talking. He couldn't hear a word the man was saying above the roar of the fake wind. He waved his hand and pointed to his ear. Rehme nodded, and they trotted away from the copter which took off again as soon as they were clear. Charly was anxious to get back up there. He had a gold badge to earn.

"What is it?" Hauk asked as soon as the noise died down.

Rehme was panting, out of breath. His blue serge suit fit him like it was a hand-me-down from a gorilla. "We have a small jet in trouble, sir," he said between gulps of air. "Over restricted airspace."

Hauk looked hard at him. "Did you say a jet?"

The man nodded.

"Where is he?"

Rehme's eyes drifted skyward, as if he was looking for the plane. "About seven miles and closing."

They had reached the air traffic control bunker. Rehme hurried inside. Hauk started to follow, then stopped for a second. He looked up the way Rehme had done, then followed the man through the doorway.

The doorway opened to stairs. The steps down were steep and poorly lit.

Rehme was in the lead, "We can't reach him," he said over his shoulder. "There was one transmission about ten minutes ago. He identified as 'David Fourteen' and then all of a sudden he was cut off."

"You can't raise him?" Hauk asked.

"Not a word."

The stairs terminated in the air traffic bunker. The room was softly lit, mostly from the bluish green glow of all the instruments that filled the four walls, floor to ceiling.

Hauk didn't need to ask to know where the commotion was. A group of controllers was huddled around a single radar screen. He

moved up on them and looked over some shoulders.

A small blip was moving across the gridded field. One man sat at the console. He was speaking into a microphone,

"David Fourteen, do you copy? Over."

Rehme walked up next to Hauk, his face grim. Hauk knew that he was wondering why this had to happen on *his* shift. There was an answering voice on the small speaker, but it was so distorted that it was incomprehensible.

The man with the mike spoke again. "David Fourteen, I'm calling air rescue. Please turn to band 749 and stand by."

He turned, weary eyed, to Hauk and Rehme. "Still no reply," he said, shaking his head.

Rehme nodded and pointed to a switch on the console. The man turned and flipped it. "Bayonne, I have a mayday in restricted space."

The radio crackled back immediately. "New York, I have him," the tinny voice replied. "Thirteen east. He's losing altitude fast."

Hauk turned and stared at Rehme. "Who is he?"

"I don't know," Rehme answered in clipped tones.

That wasn't good enough. "You have the code."

The man pursed his lips and took a breath. Everyone had turned to stare at him. "There's no David Fourteen on the computer," he said softly.

"Unlisted?"

Rehme was nervous now, visibly shaken. He ran a hand across his leathery face. "It's an unregistered code. We had to call Washington."

Hauk just stared at the man. That plane could be anything, and it was coming down right in their laps. He didn't want to make decisions like this, didn't ever want to make them.

There were several beats of silence, then the radio crackled, making them all jump. A voice was coming up, a voice jumbled with static.

The controller adjusted his tuner. "I think I got 'em, sir," he said.

Then the voice was there, and Hauk wished that it wasn't.

". . . it's too late, assholes! All your imperialist weapons and lies can't save him now. We're going down. We're . . ."

The voice drowned in static again. Hauk felt his insides tightening, stomach churning. The controller was back on the mike, frantic.

"David Fourteen, do you copy? Do you copy, David Fourteen?"

A man called from across the room, from the computer bank. "Code's coming in, sir," he called, and his voice had the same knife

edge to it as the controller's.

Hauk and Rehme moved quickly to the computer, the controller's voice still jangling their ears. They got down close to the screen and watched the typer print it out:

AIRCRAFT IDENT
CODE: DAVID 14
DECODE: AIR FORCE ONE

At that exact instant, Bob Hauk wished that he had died in Leningrad.

V

AIR FORCE ONE

October 23
7:35 P.M.

Mousey, they used to call him when he was in Congress. Mousey or Straddler, as in fences. The Senator from the great State of Alabama used to call him worse. But it didn't bother him. Now they all had to call him Mister President, and the first thing he did when he got elected was to cut off some very important water projects to the great State of Alabama. The Senator, oddly enough, disappeared on a fishing trip and was never seen again.

He stared out the window of the plane as they cut through the cloud bank, and he was glad that they were airtight. He watched the wings buffet in the turbulence, sometimes narrowing his gaze to take in his own reflection in the cabin window. Mousey.

"President Harker," said a voice beside him.

He looked up. The stewardess was bending over him. Her dark blue uniform was pressed just so; her hair smelled slightly of jasmine.

"Yes, my dear?" he said in his soft, disarming voice.

"Can I get you a drink, sir?"

"No." He shook his head. "No, thank you."

There was something very strange about the woman's eyes. Harker watched her very carefully, and didn't like what he saw: LBJ had once said that if a politician couldn't walk into a room and tell immediately who his friends and enemies were, then he was in the wrong business. This woman didn't like him. He wondered what she was doing working for him.

The stewardess smiled the kind of smile you put on for the photographer and walked off toward the cockpit. Harker looked idly around the lush cabin. The secret servicemen sat at the big, round imitation wood table playing poker for bullets. They spoke in short, monotone sentences, their eyes, from habit, continually drifting. The two doctors from Walter Reed, whose names he didn't know or care to know, were quietly getting soused at the small, padded bar. No one else seemed to notice anything odd about the stewardess, so he just let

it go.

He stretched, feeling more bored than tired, and his hand hit the briefcase that was propped up on the seat beside him. He looked at it and smiled. It seemed silly to him to have such a large valise for the one small cassette that it held. But that was the government for you.

Bombs. He didn't know a damn thing about bombs. But his people told him they had one. The Super Flash, they called it. Thermonuclear and clean as a whistle, they could zap out the Ruskies and the Chinks and not leave so much as one particle of radiation in the atmosphere.

He was on his way to the Summit Meeting at Hartford to play the information tape to the Russian and Chinese delegations. He'd give them twenty-four hours to surrender or he'd turn the entire eastern world into a giant firestorm.

Some would call it extortion, but Harker preferred to think of it as compromise. And compromise was something that John Harker knew a lot about.

It was what got him elected to the Presidency when no one thought he could do it. He was considered a New York liberal by his colleagues; he used the same soft-spoken, low key, egghead approach that characterized his boyhood hero, Adlai Stevenson. That sort of thing got good play in New York. Of course, he didn't share Stevenson's weakness, his passionate concern for ideals. Ideals just tended to get in the way of the real issues, like reelection.

So, he quietly put in his time in the Congress, mousing his way along. He saved his political chits and sharpened his arrows, and when the right time came along, he moved. The war had everything turned around and in chaos. The country, at least what was left of it, was looking for new leadership. Harker pulled in his lines, worked a few coup d'états on his enemies, and when all the bloodletting was done, he stood at the top of the hill.

He was it—the Man.

And he liked it. Loved it. He had the power of a nation behind him. He *was* the power of the nation. He wasn't Mousey anymore. And the great State of Alabama didn't have its water projects.

Now he had a bomb that could make him President of the World. He'd go to Hartford, deliver his message, then retreat to the deep shelters at Camp David to await the response. Maybe he'd take that stewardess with him and fuck some sense into her, bang the hatred right out of her eyes. It was an intriguing thought.

The plane suddenly buffeted, nearly throwing Harker out of his seat. He jerked his head toward the cockpit to hear the sounds of a scuffle behind the door.

“What the hell?”

The movement had thrown everyone else to the floor. The secret servicemen were up first, moving to the cockpit. There was confusion as the plane rocked back and forth. Something was wrong, desperately wrong.

“Help me,” Harker called. “God help me!”

The doctors thought he was referring to them. They ran to him, as the agents tried to get through the cockpit door. It was apparently locked from the inside. The movements had steadied somewhat, but the plane was going down, steadily down.

The doctors were on him, checking his pulse, heads darting to the door. One of the secret servicemen was banging futilely against the terrorist-proof steel and wood with the butt of a rifle.

All at once, the cabin speakers came up. Something must have accidentally hit the button. All movement in the cabin stopped dead still, like a freeze frame.

“. . . and lies can’t stop him now. We’re going down. We’re going down hard.

That damned stewardess. He knew he shouldn’t have trusted her. An anarchist, for god’s sake. Those people were insane. They’d do anything. Harker’s pulse was racing. They couldn’t do this to him. They couldn’t. He had to save himself.

The voice was still coming over the speakers as the secret service began throwing their weight against the door two at a time.

“All your guns and spying and computers can’t stop the people’s rightful vengeance. Can’t stop me!” Her voice was rising in intensity, peaked with hysteria. “Tell this to the workers when they ask where your leader went!”

There was a pause. Harker shoved the doctors away from him. They were too scared to be of any use anyway. The escape pod. That’s what he needed. He felt for the revolver in his jacket pocket. He was going to have the pod. He’d defend it if he had to.

The woman spoke again. Her words came more slowly; she was obviously reading. Her voice was vibrating, insane. Harker knew that she fully intended to take the plane down and die with it. “We the soldiers of the National Liberation Front of America, in the name of workers and all oppressed of this imperialist country, have struck a fatal blow to the racist police state.”

Two of the secret servicemen ran back to Harker while the other continued banging on the door.

One of them was talking. “Sir, we can’t get . . .”

“Jesus Christ, shoot the lock!” Harker screamed.

The man’s head was darting. “We can’t. She’s pressurized the cabin!”

“Rip out the hinges!”

One of the men began pulling him to his feet. “We’ve got to get you to the pod, sir.”

“Yes. Yes. By all means.”

His mind was whirling, out of control. He was trying to move, to walk, but they were handcuffing his wrist to that stupid briefcase. That was about the last thing he needed right then.

They had him walking. His free hand fingered the gun in his pocket, just in case. They moved to the rear of the cabin. One of the men was already turning the wheellock in the floor that led to the pod.

He turned once more to the front of the plane. The man up there was having some luck with the hinges.

“The door . . .” he started.

“No time.”

They were easing him down into the pod. It was small and cramped—claustrophobic. There was a tiny padded seat, the walls likewise padded. The only instrumentation was a readout screen that sat in front of the seat.

Hands were fastening his seatbelt. Someone clamped an aluminum bracelet onto his wrist, and the readout board immediately lit up, showing in moving blips his life functions: blood pressure, heartbeat and temperature. He thought about how silly it was to have a machine to tell him when he died.

He looked up just once to see faces staring down at him. Every one of them wanted to be in that pod. His fingers tightened on the pistol.

Then they closed the hatch, and Harker was alone in a dark void, his only companion a blipping readout board, a perverse sort of mirror. Then,

movement . . .

Rehme was trembling, hands over his face. “Oh god,” he moaned. “Oh god, no.”

Hauk just ignored him, his gaze fixed on the radar screen, his mind whirling, looking for alternatives. On the screen, the red blip was moving into the flashing danger area—New York City.

He glanced over at the controller. The man was white as milk, lips moving soundlessly. No one talked; they just watched the blip.

Static over the speaker, then that voice again: “What better revolutionary example than to let *their* President perish in the inhuman dungeon of his own imperialist prison.”

Hauk moved away from the screen, away from the congestion of men standing around it. He stood, back to the commotion, staring at nothing. The crazy woman was still talking.

“The bosses of the racist, sexist, police state are shuddering under the collective might of the worker’s rightful vengeance!”

Hauk put a hand to his hair, smoothed it, composed himself.

“Workers of the world, look up into the skies! The people have won a glorious victory.”

A crashing sound came through the speaker. A cry from the woman, a strangled rasp of, “Bitch!”

There was loud popping, distorting off the audibility range, coming through as dead air at its peak.

Bullets, Hauk thought

He spun back to the screen, hope rising. A low moan was seeping through the speaker. Then a high pitched squeal, then . . . nothing. Soft, purring static.

There was a second of silence, then the controller said, “He’s down.”

Hauk was out of the traffic control door before he even thought about it. Central control was down the hall; they’d know exactly where the plane went down. He heard a noise behind him and turned. Rehme was right on his heels.

“I need you in one piece,” he told the man.

There was already activity in the bunker when they arrived. They had watched the thing go down, too. Blackbellies were running everywhere. Preparing advance deployment

“Commissioner,” someone called to him as he entered. He hurried over.

It was a beanpole of a man, all knees and elbows. He was excited, pointing to a medical scanner.

“What is it?” Hauk barked.

“Vital signs monitor,” the man choked out. “We use it for shore parties. It came on just before the plane crashed.”

Hauk looked at Rehme. The man had composed himself somewhat. “Escape pod,” he said. “They must have ejected him before . . .”

Hauk’s eyes flew back to the screen. All the blips were active, the pulse charging.

“He’s still alive!” Hauk said. “Where the hell is he?”

“Here,” Rehme said, excitement flavoring his words. “Over here,”

Hauk moved to the man. He was standing by a bank of green glowing machines. Rehme’s hand was shaking as he pointed to a schematic screen.

It showed a geometric, three-dimensional image of Air Force One. The computer was forming the image, inventing it from radar information. The plane tracked through the air. Then, a three-dimensional image of a skyscraper moved into the frame and silently, artistically, the plane collided with it, everything breaking apart in beautiful, mathematic symmetry. From the rear of the plane a blinking red dot arched slowly away from the hulk of the aircraft.

“The escape pod,” Hauk said, and his voice came out hoarse.

Rehme had a pocketcom in his hand, fingers flying across the keyboard. “Forty degrees,” he said.

The view from the invert screen pulled wider and the red dot fell away from the plane, making a parabolic arc down to street level.

“Fifty yards from crash site,” Rehme said,

Hauk started for the door. There were no decisions now, just action. “I’m going in,” he said. “Pinpoint the crash and get to me on the pads.”

He was out the door and moving. It was going to be a long night.

VI

RED ALERT

8:30 P.M.

The rain hadn't started yet. The moisture was straining the dark clouds, stuffing them full like infection clogging a wound. Bob Hauk wasn't thinking about the rain anymore, though. He was thinking about war.

The helicopters stretched out before him on the wide landing field, props beating the air, whipping it to frenzy. Their sound was grating and malevolent.

There were twenty copters; they were all painted flat black. They were screaming and angry, straining at the leash, ripping at the air with their whirring blades. They were all going crazy with the smell of blood.

Hauk was out of the air control bunker and moving toward the copters. He yelled at the first black suit that he saw. “Backpack!” he called.

The man stopped walking, his face filled with confusion. “BACKPACK!” Hauk screamed, trying to get above the horrible whines that filled the air. He pointed to his back.

The man nodded in understanding, gave him the thumbs-up sign and hurried off. Hauk started for the choppers again. He was through with war; he really was. And this was too much like it.

Leningrad had iced it for him. He took an early retirement after that one and, somehow, when he packed and came home, he had forgotten to pack his medals. It made him think of Snake Plissken for just a second. He had almost gotten to meet the man who had kept the USPF on the run for nearly five years. Now he didn't know if he'd ever get to. Once you were dumped in the city—that was it. You were gone.

Bob Hauk knew that for a fact.

The blackbelly with the backpack ran up to him. Hauk took the black canvas sack from him with a silent nod. The man smiled broadly, his eyes glazed with the excitement. Hauk tightened his lips and moved on.

He was into the field of copters, caught in their vortex. The air swirled angrily around him. He wanted to remove himself mentally from the whole business, but he couldn't. He'd spent too many years in the military, too many years giving and receiving orders. He would do what was expected of him. Always what was expected of him.

Black figures were blurring past, troopers in full battle dress: backpacks with survival gear, helmets, rifles, infrared goggles. Their mouths were open full, screaming, but Hauk couldn't hear them above the helicopter noise.

He slipped off his jacket and threw it to the ground, then looped his arms through the straps of the pack and snugged it up against his back.

He kept as much distance from the whole thing as he could, tried to stay right on the edge of it. But he was a soldier, a professional soldier, and the call of battle was like sex to him. He was getting sucked in.

He kept walking until he caught sight of the command copter. It bore, in shining gold, the seal of the USPF. He looked at the icon of the eagle in the seal's center. Its eye was staring and angry; its talons were wrapped around a length of barbed wire. The word COMMISSIONER was stenciled neatly just below the shield.

Opening the copter door, he hoisted himself into the big machine. He had a hard time getting himself situated in the seat with the bulky pack on his back. He wouldn't be wearing it except that a regulation had come down saying that all personnel who entered the prison most wear survival gear. It was his own regulation.

When he got squared away, he shut the door. It cut down the outside noise considerably. The radio speaker blared static in front of him. He pointed to it.

"Traffic control?" he asked loudly.

The man grunted, yelling. "Yeah. Rehme's on it."

A headset with attached mike was lying on the console. Hauk picked it up and put it on his head, juicing the transmit switch. "Rehme . . . this is Hauk. You there? Over."

Rehme's voice came back firm and in control. "I'm here."

"You got the location? Over."

"Yeah . . . we're talking about the south. Somewhere around the corner of Beaver and . . . uh . . . Nassau."

Hauk didn't know the city that well. "Listen, Control. Where the hell is . . ."

"You know where Battery Park is?"

"Sure."

"Just get to Battery Park and look for the smoke."

"Gotcha." Hauk started to toggle off, then, "Is he . . . how's the monitor?"

"Vital signs are still positive," Rehme's distorted voice said. "He's still alive. Good luck."

"Thanks."

Hauk nodded once to the pilot and stuck his thumb in the air. The man lifted them off at once, pointing them to the north and east. The other copters went up too, buzzing, crying. Hauk felt as if he were in the middle of a flock of carrion birds.

Bob Hauk had come back from the war feeling old, used up. He came back to find that he had lost his family. His wife was just gone, no trace or even conjecture as to what could have happened. Of his two grown sons, Walt died in the L.A. fire bombing; Jerry was caught looting a supermarket in Chicago. They said he was crazy. They sent him to prison. In New York.

Hauk was all empty inside. He felt like a Halloween jack-o-lantern that had had the guts removed and a lit candle stuck inside to make it look like the thing was alive.

He came to the prison to find Jerry, but they wouldn't let him inside. So he hired on as a trooper, but when they found out who he was, they offered him the job of Commissioner. Nobody else would touch the job with a hundred-foot bayonet.

Hauk didn't want it either, but it was the only way he could think of to find his son. For several years he went into the city every chance he got, but it was a useless exercise. The only records kept were of the prisoners going in. Once inside the city, they were on their own—for life.

Within the anarchy of the city itself, it was worse than useless trying to find anything out—it was madness. Hauk had beaten his head against the wall of silence so many times that he felt as if he were permanently bruised.

Then one day, he just quit looking. He had drained out what little bit of life force that had been left within him, finally and irrevocably, until only the burnt-out shell remained. That had been a year ago, and he hadn't been anywhere near the city since.

The pilot was pointing down at the shoreline. "There's the Park," he said loudly.

Hauk followed his finger down to the dark open ground without buildings. Somehow, it looked better at night. He couldn't see the

barren ground and skeletons of trees that had once been fertile and alive.

He switched on the transmitter. “This is Hauk, over the Battery . . . we’re moving down.”

He had the pilot take him down low, down to the rooftops. Straight ahead he could see a large cloud of rising smoke, lit from beneath. The pressure and humidity were pushing against the smoke, forcing it back down upon itself. It seemed to just hang there, suspended in space and time.

Hauk was back on the mike, “Crash site ahead, Rehme.”

“Roger,” came the reply. “I have you on the board.”

“We’re going down.”

They brought the copters down right on the streets. Deadly streets. Visions of perdition. They were in a valley, canyons of stone towering all around them. The streets were dark and desolate, the garbage of internal decay strewn everywhere. The burned-out and silent hulks of dead cars lined the roadway. They slept on rusted axles, tires long gone as good burning fuel for fires. The street was filled with smoke rolling back upon itself, a surreal landscape in the lower levels of hell. A fire burned in the midst of the smoke. A bright, sputtering fire that ignited the smoke and lit the street to a flickering nightmare.

“Don’t shut down the engines,” Hauk told the pilot, and opened the door to the racket. The dark mouths of the other choppers had opened already, vomiting blackbellies with long, shiny rifles and glowing red goggles for eyes.

Their flashlights came on, stabbing the darkness with small, symmetrical lines of brightness. The smoke came down on the beams, giving solid substance to them. Smoke danced in the light, made a game of it all.

The blackbellies formed tight defensive lines and began to advance, flashlight beams dancing and jiggling with the smoke as they moved. Hauk narrowed his eyes to a squint, trying to see through the congestion.

They moved slowly, carefully. Hauk was worried about the men. They were pumped up, ready to kill. If it came to that, he would have a difficult time controlling them.

“Commissioner!” someone yelled. “Sir!”

He moved out of the line, toward the voice. He waded through the curtain of smoke, unable to peg the sounds.

“Where are you?” he called.

“Here, sir. Over here!”

A flashlight beam was wiggling through the haze, coming back at him. He walked to the beam, tracing it back like a lifeline. A uniformed captain was attached to the other end.

“What have you got?” Hauk asked when he got up on the man.

“Here . . . something.”

He tilted the beam in the other direction. Something as bright and orange as a gasoline fire was billowing into the light

“The chute,” Hauk said.

They moved toward the thing, twenty yards in the distance. It was trying to rise in the natural updraft between the buildings, but the low pressure kept pushing it back down. They followed the chute lines for another thirty feet and found the pod.

It was round, the size of a weather balloon and was solidly imbedded in the side of a building, only about half exposed. Hauk ran up to it. The hatch was already open.

“Damn.” He leaned over the opening and looked inside. The monitor board was blipping happily, but the pod was empty. The President’s vital signs were there; he was gone.

The captain was at his elbow. “Look.”

He looked. The man was pointing.

A figure was moving out of the smoke and the darkness toward them. It moved slowly, shuffling.

The captain brought a rifle up beside Hauk. The Commissioner pushed it aside. He could hear the sound of weapons being primed off in the smoke.

“Hold your fire!” he barked into the haze.

The figure, gauzy and ethereal, came closer. It was a man or least it had once been. Hauk started moving toward him. He was thin like ice on the Hudson, pale and wispy as the gray smoke that stirred around him, clinging to his ragged clothes. He was living death, a walking corpse. He stopped

“I’m Romero,” he rasped.

Hauk walked right up to him, smelling the rot that rolled out of his mouth and passed for breath. “I’m Hauk.”

“I know.”

Romero smiled broadly, a grinning deathshead smile. All of his teeth had been filed down to tiny, razor sharp points. He spoke slowly, dragging the words up painfully through the slime pit of his lungs. “If you touch me,” he said, “he dies. If you’re not in the air in thirty seconds, he dies. If you come back in, he dies.”

Hauk just stared at him, trying to read behind the lifeless, sunken eyes. Couldn't.

"I have something for you," Romero said, and held out his hand. Hauk reached out, never taking his eyes off Romero's. The man, chuckling softly, dropped something lightly in his palm.

Hauk looked down to see a small, rolled up cloth.

Blood had soaked through it. He looked once at Romero's grinning teeth and unwound the wrapping. It contained a finger, severed at the third joint. There was a ring on the finger. And on the ring—the Presidential seal.

Hauk raised his eyes once more to Romero.

"Twenty seconds," the man said.

"I'm ready to talk."

"Nineteen. Eighteen."

"What do you want?"

Romero just grinned—a mask, a grinning demon in human disguise.

"Seventeen. Sixteen."

Hauk realized that the man had no idea what he wanted. He started backing away, never taking his eyes from Romero. He waved his hand above his head.

"Let's go. Let's go!"

There were shouts, confusion. They didn't want to go. The tension was built and demanded release. Somewhere in the smoke, a gun went off.

Hauk was screaming now, trying to control them with his fury. "Hold your fire, goddamnit! Hold it!"

"Fifteen. Fourteen."

Hauk turned his back on Romero and ran into the midst of his people. He started grabbing them, turning them back toward the distant copters.

"We're getting out of here," he screamed. "Let's go! Now!"

They started turning, reluctantly.

"Move, damnit! Run!"

Finally they turned and committed, putting the stoppers back on their lust for a little while, Hauk made sure they were all leaving, then turned back to Romero. He was gone.

He ran quickly to the command copter and ordered the pilot into the sky as soon as he got in. His insides were jangling, raw, exposed nerves.

They had him. The lunatics had the President, and god only knew what they had in mind.

It began, finally, to rain.

VII

LIBERTY ISLAND EXECUTIVE CONFERENCE SUITE

8:53 P.M.

Hauk walked alone down the unlit hallway. Office doors were open down the hall's length, some of them spilling globs of harsh neon light out into the corridor like tiny drifts of white, powdered snow. It had been a long time since Hauk had seen snow that was any color except dingy gray brown.

The Secretary of State was waiting for him in conference. He had been traveling in a follow-up plane that came behind the President's, to avoid any accidents that could claim too many important lives. He was going to ask what they were going to do about the President.

Hauk had a very specific feeling about that. He felt that they should simply get themselves another President. He wasn't going to say that to the Secretary, though. He was too much of a soldier for that

He arrived at the conference door and hesitated for a second before going in. He looked like a wreck. His face and clothes were dirty and sooty from the smoke. His eyes burned and his mouth was dry and overridden with a taste of plastic. He had lost his coat out on the landing field.

The Secretary was a man used to taking orders, not giving them. He would want Hauk to take as much responsibility for whatever was going to happen as he could. Hauk didn't like that, but he didn't see any way around it.

He opened the door. It was bright in the room, garish. The Secretary had turned on every light in the place, almost as if he were afraid of dealing with the dark corners. All the windows were shut tight to keep out any trace of the gas that wasn't coming down with the light rain outside. It was stuffy in the room due to the lack of circulating air. With no ventilation, cigarette smoke hazed the air, hanging down in sleepy, drifting clouds.

The Secretary sat at the big walnut conference table, red telephone by one arm, already-full ashtray by the other. He was a slight man dressed in a gray suit. His eyes were fixed, staring vacantly at the

large map of the city that occupied the entire wall opposite him. His face was probably amiable generally, but now that it was transfixed by worry it was an ugly face. He seemed, like most politicians, to be on the very edge of exhaustion, with a small outer fence of desperation the only thing holding him in one piece.

Hauk was not going to like working with him. Politicians were wait-and-see folks; they were let's-check-it-out-in-the-polls-and-then-compromise-it folks, who weren't used to any real decision-making.

The man came to his feet when Hauk walked in. His spirit lightened, almost as if he were literally transferring his burden over to the Commissioner.

"Mister Secretary," Hauk said.

The man was around the desk and vigorously pumping Hauk's hand. *That* was something the man could relate to. "Bill Prather," he said, and fixed Hauk with a professional stare. "Am I glad to see you."

Hauk looked the man over. He had a full head of silver hair, but it didn't mean that he was old. He was of very indeterminate age, probably somewhere between forty and sixty. He had a good set of teeth and the easily accessible face of a favorite uncle, back when people still had uncles who weren't crazy.

"Bob Hauk," he responded, and broke the Secretary's grip on his hand.

"What's the news?" Prather asked.

"Not very good, I'm afraid," Hauk answered.

The Secretary walked back to the desk and took a cigarette out of the pack, even though another one was still smoldering in the cut glass ashtray. He fidgeted getting the thing into his mouth, his hand visibly shaking when he lit it "Give it to me," he mumbled around the smoker.

Hauk walked up to the opposite side of the table, resting his hands on its top. "The President went down in the prison," he said, then moved away from the table, over to the big map.

He pointed to Battery Park. "He went down around here. We sent a task force in immediately, but it was too late. They already had him."

The Secretary exhaled a lungful of smoke. "They?"

"The prisoners," Hauk answered.

Prather shrugged broadly. "Well surely, Commissioner, you must just go in and take him out."

Hauk walked back to the table again. "It's not that simple," he said quietly.

"Why not?"

"These people are very dangerous, I . . ."

"Come on, Hauk," Prather said, and his tone was condescending. "This is your prison. Don't you have any control over your own prison?"

Hauk felt the anger rise up his throat. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the cloth-wrapped finger and tossed it onto the table. The wrapping came loose as he did so.

"No, sir," he said. "I don't"

Prather's mouth fell open when he saw the finger. His body convulsed slightly and he turned his head. "Hauk," he choked. "Put it away. Please."

Hauk stuck the finger back into his pocket "Those people rule themselves in there, Mister Secretary. All we do here is keep them from getting out."

The man turned back around, breathing deeply. The false bravado was gone completely; all that was exposed now was the frightened shell of a petty bureaucrat who was in over his head. "How could such a situation . . ."

Hauk put up a hand to silence him. "Listen," he said. "I didn't invent the fucking system, you people did."

"I don't think I like your tone of voice."

Hauk drew himself up full. "Fine," he said, and turned to the door. "You handle things then. I'm going to go home and get some sleep."

He started for the door, wishing, really wishing, that Prather would let him go. He knew that he wouldn't, though.

"No," the man said, before Hauk even got halfway across the room.

He turned back around.

"P-please," Prather stammered. "I need your help. I can't handle anything like this."

"Yeah," Hauk said, and returned to the table. He sat down in the chair opposite the Secretary.

Prather took short, nervous pulls on his cigarette. He didn't offer one to the Commissioner, so Hauk just reached across the table and took one.

"What have we got?" Prather asked.

Hauk lit up and took a deep drag. It tasted stale, metallic. "We've got two choices," he replied. "We can either try to go in and get him out, or we can wait on the prisoners. They're holding him for something, some kind of ransom. As soon as they figure out what they

want, they'll try to deal for him."

He sat back, watching the glowing, dead ash build up on the end of the smoker, "It's a big city," he said, "in case you haven't noticed. I seriously doubt that we could even find him if we went in, much less rescue him alive. So, I strongly suggest that we wait for the ransom demands."

"We can't," Prather said softly.

"What do you mean, we can't?"

Prather pursed his lips, his eyes once again drifting to the city map. "John Harker is on a very delicate mission right now. He was on his way to a summit meeting in Hartford that will, most likely, determine the final outcome of the war."

Hauk closed his eyes and leaned back. He didn't want to hear this. "What sort of mission?"

Prather looked around, as if somebody might be eavesdropping. He lowered his nervous voice. "There is a briefcase cuffed to his arm that holds a cassette. The cassette talks about a powerful new bomb, a fusion bomb that . . ."

"Never mind," Hauk snapped. "I don't need to know. How much time have you got to get him there?"

"Just about twenty-four hours," Prather answered. "After that, the Russians and Chinese go back home and things get crazy again. We've worked for years to set up this meeting. I doubt that we could ever get another chance."

Hauk stood up and began pacing. "Who's making the top end decisions right now?" he asked after a minute.

"The Vice President," Prather answered, and rested his hand on the red phone. "He's waiting on the other end of this line to hear from us."

"Will he be cooperative?"

"What have you got in mind?"

Hauk stopped pacing and stood, staring at the map, his hands at parade rest behind him. "We could never get in there with troops," he said over his shoulder. "We'd never even find enough of him to bury."

"Then, what?"

"One person could get in," he said. "One person could move around unnoticed."

"Have you got someone in mind?"

Hauk turned around, pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and threw it on the floor. "Maybe," he said, and crushed the smoldering

butt with the heel of his shoe.

He moved across the room to a phone by the map. He picked it up and spoke as soon as the operator came on. “Cronenberg,” was all he said.

He waited while the receiver buzzed in his ear. After several rings, a craggy voice came through the line. “Medical,” it said.

“Cronenberg, this is Hauk.”

“Hello, Commissioner, I haven’t heard from you in . . .”

“Do you have a prisoner down there named Plissken?”

“Why, yes, he’s a . . .”

“I’ve got no time, Doctor. Just listen to me: detain Plissken in processing. I may have something for him. Can you do that?”

“Well, yes. I . . .”

“No time, Doctor. Are you still working on that Stinger Project?”

“On and off.”

“Does it work?”

“Theoretically.”

“Get it ready. We may be testing it out.”

“You mean . . . on a human?”

“Yeah. I’m up in conference. Get your directives going and get your ass up here.”

He hung up the phone without waiting for a reply, then turned back to Prather. “Here it is: we’ve got a prisoner here, name of Plissken. He’s one of the world’s all-time slippery bastards. I say we offer him amnesty, and give him twenty-four hours to get the President out to earn it. He’s smart and he’s one of them. He could do things that we can’t.”

“Do you really think it will work?”

Hauk walked over and leaned on the table, staring Prather down. “Probably not,” he replied. “But it’s the only game in town.”

“How do you know he’ll even keep his part of the bargain?”

Hauk smiled slightly, more a grimace. “I’ve got an ace in the hole.” He sat back down. “I would suggest that you get your Vice President on the phone right now.”

Prather picked up the receiver and waited for the connections. Hauk thought a minute and realized that he didn’t even know the Vice President’s name. Was he that far out of touch?

He moved away from the table, back over to the map. Prather began talking over the phone, but his voice was just outside the range

of Hauk's hearing.

It was an old map, pre-war. The Battery Park area was shaded a pale green. If they did the map now, they'd have to make it dull brown. He traced the streets with his eyes. Many of them he had walked at length, looking for Jerry.

He listened to the drone of Prather's voice for a minute, then turned and walked near the Secretary to catch what was being said.

The man was nodding his head. "I'm convinced there's no connection, sir. The prisoners aren't aware of the hijacking. As far as they're concerned, it was an accident . . . yes sir. He's right here."

Prather made a face. "This is Bob Hauk," he said and handed the red receiver across the table. It was warm to the touch.

Hauk stood there, hearing the man's voice, but not really listening. The Vice President was simply saying all the same things that Prather had said earlier.

"We can't," Hauk said at the proper time. "If we go down there with choppers, they'll kill him. We're lucky now if he's still alive."

"What do they want?" the voice said, and it sounded tired, too.

"They don't want anything, yet, and by the time they figure out what they want, it'll be too late."

Prather was tugging on his sleeve. "Tell him we have to go with your plan *now!"*

On the phone, the Vice President was saying something about tomorrow. He didn't want to make a decision either.

"We can't wait until tomorrow. If we have to move in and take the island, it's a last resort. It's nine oh five. I want permission to try the rescue."

There was dead air on the line for a time, then, "All right. Try your rescue. But, I'm warning you . . ."

"I know," Hauk interrupted. "It's my responsibility."

He hung up the phone and looked at Prather. The tension was draining somewhat out of the man's face. There was a sharp knock on the door.

"Come," Hauk said, and Cronenberg walked in. He was tall and slightly stooped, his posture and long white lab coat making him look somewhat like a whooping crane. He was old-looking, but it was a healthy old. His features were rugged and likable.

"Is it ready?" Hauk asked.

The man fixed him with a cold stare. "Yes, but I can't guarantee . . ."

“How long will it take?”

“A few seconds. But I’m against using it.”

Hauk slapped a hand on the tabletop. “I have a directive from Washington.”

Cronenberg moved over to him, and it was obvious that the man was angry inside, that he was just barely keeping that anger under control. “This is an experimental unit, Hauk,” he said. “I’ve never tried it on a man. This isn’t like you.”

Hauk didn’t have time to be diplomatic. “You can test it out,” he said.

A black-suited, overweight sergeant stuck his head in the door. His eyes bypassed Hauk and stopped on Cronenberg. “They just took him in to quarantine,” he said.

“Bring him to my office,” Hauk returned. The man left. He looked at Cronenberg. “Warm up your machine, Doctor.”

The doctor’s eyes flared, but he didn’t say a word. Instead he turned sharply on his heels and marched out of the room. There was silence for a few seconds, then Prather spoke:

“There’s something that needs to be said, Hauk,” he began. “The President is, of course, very important to us . . . but the briefcase—that’s more important right now.”

“Yeah,” Hauk replied. “I kind of figured that one out for myself.”

VIII

THE STERI-CHAMBER

9:00 P.M.

They sat Plissken in the steri-chamber, so he could think about it for awhile. There was nothing fancy or scientific about the steri-chamber. It was a small, white room where they strapped you naked on a stainless steel table, then put a box about the size of a typewriter over your hips. The machine then, quite quickly and smartly, would cut your balls off.

They had a blackbelly named Duggan in there to watch him. Duggan was the craziest son of a bitch that Plissken had ever seen. If anyone belonged in the steri-chamber getting his balls cut off, it was Duggan.

The blackbelly was hopping around the room on all fours, imitating a rabbit he had seen once that had gotten a dose of gas. Plissken had a pretty good loop of chain to work with while he was sitting down. If he could only get Duggan close enough to him, he could try to get it around the man's neck. Then, with any luck, he could use his gun to shoot off the chains.

"And then . . . and then . . ." Duggan was out of breath, eyes wide, unable to stop laughing. "And then, he'd kindly go on off to the side."

The man flung himself wildly off at an angle, banging into a small table full of instruments and gauze. The table fell down, skittering the instruments loudly across the shiny floor.

Duggan jumped to his feet and his head darted around. His gummy monkey face suddenly solidified into something rock hard and perverted. He pulled a .45 out of his belt and leveled it at the Snake. His hand was shaking with rage,

"So, that's the way it's going to be, is it," he said, his voice quaking. He was breathing loudly through his nose. "Just look what you did, you gutless bastard." He nodded his head toward the mess on the floor.

Plissken tightened his hands on the chain, waiting for his opportunity.

"You know what you're gonna do?" Duggan asked rhetorically.

"You're gonna get down there right now and pick that stuff up, that's what."

"Go to hell," Plissken said.

Duggan began vibrating physically. He primed the bolt on the gun. His arm was shaking, weaving around. When he tried to speak, the words got all balled up in his throat.

"Down . . . on the . . . floor. NOW!"

Plissken moved off the bench, his length of chain stretching full as he stood up. He set the table upright, then squatted down and began picking up the scattered metal clamps and hemostats. Duggan stayed just out of arm's reach, always out of arm's reach.

Plissken looked up at him from the floor. The man had a monstrous grin plastered on his face. He turned back to the work. All at once, Duggan was right there. Plissken had turned his head just enough to see the steel-toed boot curling toward his exposed side.

The kick was well-intentioned; it had authority. It caught him just below the rib cage, and his whole side exploded. He jerked up with it, crashing back into the instrument table, all his work gone, clattering back to the floor. He hit the wall hard, then slid and doubled over to the floor.

Duggan was on top of him, gasping putrid breath, his automatic buried deep in the flesh of Plissken's neck, cutting off his air.

"Ohhh, Snakey," he rasped. "What we're gonna do to you."

He was jostling his hips against Plissken's side. "We're gonna fix you so that there won't be no more little snakes slithering around. Yesss."

Somewhere between the pain and the nausea, Plissken found the length of chain and got hold of it. He looped it once around his hands, and itched for Duggan's neck.

Then, a voice. "What the hell . . ."

Duggan jumped to his feet, still shaking, trying to get himself under control. Plissken looked up from his sideways view on the floor. The fat duty sergeant from in-processing had come into the room.

"He was . . . trying to escape," Duggan said, while smoothing his disheveled hair. "That's it. I subdued the prisoner during an escape attempt."

The Sergeant looked at Duggan, then let his eyes drift down to the Snake. He never changed expression. "Something may be up," he said. "Cronenberg said to stop his processing until further notice."

"What for?"

Plissken got himself into a sitting position, leaning his back against

the wall. His side was badly bruised, but he didn't think there was any permanent damage.

"I just do what I'm told," the Sergeant answered, and looked at Plissken again. "You okay?"

"Never better," he answered, and got slowly to his feet.

The Sergeant walked up to Duggan. "Just leave him right here, understand? Don't hit him, don't hurt him, don't shoot him. Just leave him alone until you hear from me. Got it?"

"Sure, Sarge," Duggan said, holstering his gun. "You know you can count on me."

The Sergeant looked at him, sighed deeply, then stalked from the room.

Duggan flared around to Plissken, the fire in his eyes again. "Look what you did to me," he said through clenched teeth. "Try to treat you assholes with a little kindness and you throw it back in my face. Well, no more Mister Nice Guy. You get back in your seat and don't move."

Plissken went back to the bench and sat down heavily. Something was up; he couldn't imagine what. His immediate problem, though, was staying alive long enough to find out what it was. He watched Duggan carefully, watched for the madness to fog his brain again.

The man pulled a package of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. He put one in his mouth, then looked up at Plissken. He smiled. "Like a ciggy?" he asked.

No answer.

"C'mon, Snake. We'll bury the hatchet." Duggan leaned down close, holding the pack out to him. He reached tentatively for one. Duggan snatched the pack away from him at the last second.

"You don't want one of these," he said. "They taste like shit."

"They *are* shit," Plissken replied.

Duggan lit his anyway and took a deep, satisfied drag. "Just wait 'til they strap you to that table, Snakey boy. Whooee! They just whack those suckers off, just whack 'em off. No anesthetic, no nothing. Yes, sir. I've heard them scream for hours afterwards."

"I ain't there yet," Plissken said.

Duggan laughed, holding the burning cigarette up in front of Plissken's face. "Just think. No more hot peter, Snakey. No more jazzin' up the girlies. I'll tell you. I think I'd rather blow out my fuckin' brains than go around without no balls."

"What brains?" Plissken said, and regretted it immediately.

Duggan's eyes got wide again, and he was fumbling with the holster

for his gun.

“Remember what your chum said,” Plissken told him.

The man frowned deeply, trembling, then backed away, taking quick pulls on the smoker to calm himself down. “Oh, I’m going to like it when they put you on that table. I’m going to get up real close and whisper in your ear while they’re doing the job on you. Yes, sir.”

He just stared for several seconds, then smiled that frightening smile again. He walked over to the table and climbed up on it, pretending that he was strapped down. Then he started acting like the box was strapped on him. He was shaking and screaming, yelling for mercy. That’s what he was doing when the duty Sergeant came back in.

“Aw jeez, get off that table,” the man said in disgust.

Duggan jumped down. “Aw, Sarge. I was just . . .”

“I know what you were doing,” the man responded. “And I hate to disappoint you, but there ain’t gonna be no show today.”

“What?”

“Hauk wants him upstairs,”

“B-but, Sarge. This here is Snake Plissken.”

The man half smiled. “And it looks like he’s slithered out again. Let’s go, Plissken.”

The Snake smiled and stood up. “Enjoyed the show, Duggan,” he said. “You’ll have to do it for real sometime.”

That brought Duggan up close, fists balled. Just what Plissken wanted. He half turned away from the man, then came back around hard, burying manacled hands in Duggan’s groin.

The man made a sound in his throat like a whistling tea kettle, then doubled over at the waist. Plissken grabbed the back of his head, then came up hard with his knee. He heard Duggan’s nose go with an audible crack, then watched as he crumpled to the floor.

“Gaaa!”

“I’m ready,” he told the Sergeant.

The man sighed again and led him into the hall. There was a contingent of armed guards waiting for him outside the door.

“Just stay calm,” the Sergeant said, settling his big belly farther over the edge of his belt. “Don’t make any quick moves, and everything will be all right”

“Docile as a puppy,” Plissken replied. And he was.

They led him out of the hootch, into the rain. It wasn’t coming down hard, but by habit he held his breath when he got out in it, not

wanting to ingest any more of the gas than he had to.

The landing field that had been empty when they brought him in was now lousy with copters. He turned to look at them, but they just pushed him along. He was taken into another bunker near the Statue.

They went in, up a couple of flights, then down a dark hallway. They stopped in front of a doorway marked: COMMISSIONER. The Sergeant knocked on the door.

A muffled voice grunted on the other side of the door, and the Sergeant turned the knob. “Mind your manners,” he whispered to Plissken before swinging the thing open.

The Snake went in first, the guards right behind him. It was an office that looked like it was never used. The walls were bare: no pictures, no diplomas, no citations. The desk was empty. In and out baskets, empty. No pictures, not even a blotter. Just a telephone.

A man sat behind the desk. A hard man gone soft He squinted with powerful eyes. His face was set, strained. There may have been character in that face if Plissken had cared to look for it. He didn’t. All Snake Plissken was doing was looking for a way out.

“Take off the leg irons,” the man behind the desk said.

The Sergeant knotted up his eyebrows, but did as he was told, Plissken smiled with the unexpected good fortune. He immediately went over and sat down in a chair, crossing his legs.

The man behind the desk nearly smiled. He nodded to the guards. “All right,” he said.

The Sergeant took a waddling step toward the desk. “He’s dangerous, sir.”

“I know,” the man returned, and reached down to pull a pearl-handled revolver out of its resting place. He cocked it. “I’ll be all right.”

The Sergeant shrugged and motioned his people out of the room. He followed them, closing the door behind him. Plissken looked at the closed door for a minute. This was the best shot he’d ever had, one on one with an old softy. He turned to the man, smiling broadly. He held up his chained hands.

The man shook his head, his face without expression. “I’m not a fool, Plissken,” he said. “Maybe we’d better get that out of the way first.”

“Call me Snake,” Plissken smiled.

The man set his lips. Plissken could see that there was something definitely bothering him. He set the gun down carefully on the desk top, then he reached into the top drawer and pulled out a beige folder.

He opened it and read:

"Plissken. American. Lieutenant in Special Forces Unit: 'Black Light.' Two Purple Hearts in Leningrad and Siberia. Youngest man to be decorated by the President." His eyes came up for just a second to touch Plissken's, then he continued. "You robbed the Federal Reserve Depository. Life sentence in New York Maximum Security Penitentiary." He looked up from the folder again, raising his eyebrows. "I'm ready to kick your ass out of the world, war hero."

Plissken narrowed his gaze. There was something different about this man, something he couldn't put his finger on. He wasn't like the others. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Hauk," he replied. "Police Commissioner."

"Bob Hauk?"

Hauk smiled. "You remember, huh? Special Forces Unit: 'Texas Thunder.' We heard plenty about you."

Plissken remembered. Hauk commanded the air cover at Leningrad. He had lost a lot of men, too. But, look at who was on what side of the desk. "You stuck with it, then. Didn't you . . . blackbelly?"

Hank's voice came back angry. "You don't know a thing about it."

There was dead air between them, an absolute wall.

"Why are we talking?" Plissken said at last.

"I have a deal for you," Hauk said, his voice cold and businesslike. "You'll receive a full pardon for every criminal action you committed in the United States."

Going into the folder, Hauk pulled out a piece of paper and held it up. Plissken had never seen a pardon before, but that sure looked like one. He stared at Hauk, not trusting him, not willing to trust anyone who had lived through Leningrad without being changed by it.

Hauk got up and moved around the desk. Plissken was surprised by how dirty the man was. He moved up closer to the Snake, almost close enough to reach out and grab.

"There was an accident about an hour ago," Hauk said. "A small jet went down inside New York City. The President was on board."

"President of what?" Plissken asked, ready to jump on Hauk if the opportunity presented itself.

"It isn't funny, Plissken. You go in, find the President, bring him out in twenty-four hours, and you're a free man."

Plissken watched Hauk carefully, waiting for the punch line. It didn't seem to be coming. "This a joke?" he finally asked.

"I'm making you an offer."

“Bullshit.”

“Straight. Just like I said.”

Plissken sat back. He wasn’t anybody’s sucker bait. “I’ll think about it,” he answered.

Hauk took a breath, but his expression remained deadly earnest. “No time,” he said. “Give me an answer.”

“Okay,” Plissken replied. “Get a new President”

He watched Hauk’s jaw muscles tighten, but the man remained in control. He may even have been sane. “We’re still at war, Plissken. We need him alive.”

“I don’t care about your war,” the Snake answered. “Or your President.”

“Is that your answer?”

Plissken threw up his hands. “I’m thinking it over,” he snapped. He looked at Hauk again. He was really beginning to believe the man was on the level. He thought about Duggan and the steri-chamber. “Why me?” he asked.

“You flew the Gulffire over Leningrad,” the man answered quickly. “You know how to get in quiet.” He turned and walked a few paces across the room; when he turned back around his features were softer. “You’re all I’ve got,” he said quietly.

Just on the surface, it seemed to Plissken that the deal had more holes in it than a metric ton of Swiss cheese, but what the hell. He shrugged. “Well . . . I go in there one way or the other. It don’t mean shit to me. Give me the papers.” He reached for them.

Hauk shook his head, snatching back the papers. “When you come out,” he said, and this time he *was* smiling.

“Before”

“I said I wasn’t a fool, Plissken.”

Plissken fixed him with his cool, reptilian eye. “Snake,” he said, smooth as syrup. “Call me Snake.”

IX

PREFLIGHT

10:14 P.M.

Plissken walked between Hauk and Rehme. It was obvious that they were uneasy in his company since they had taken the cuffs off him; it was just as obvious that he hated being in that particular corner of the universe at that particular time.

He hated Hauk, hated him just like he hated any blackbelly. Oh, the man wore a suit and talked about prerogatives, but he was still the head killer in a society of killers—Witchfinder General. He couldn't forgive the man that. Forgiveness was nowhere to be found within the countless reflecting shards of the broken mirror that was Plissken's spirit.

"In here," Rehme said.

They turned into a door marked MATERIAL DISBURSEMENT. The room was painted battleship gray. It had a counter that slashed its width. On the other side of the counter, a cage, floor to ceiling. Within the cage were neatly stacked shelves of supplies that stretched far back into darkness.

Hauk flicked a switch beside the door, and several banks of neon lit sequentially down the length of the storeroom. It went way back.

Rehme dug down into his pocket and pulled out a chain of keys. He moved around the counter and started trying them in the cage lock. He'd try one, shake the lock until it rattled the whole cage, curse softly, then try another.

"You know I haven't had anything to eat," Plissken said.

"For how long?" Hauk asked. Then to Rehme: "We haven't got all night."

"The motherfuckers aren't marked," Rehme said, his voice edged with frustration.

"Just take it easy."

"Since yesterday," Plissken said.

"Goddamn son of a bitch," Rehme muttered.

"You look well-fed to me," Hauk said.

“It’s your game,” the Snake shrugged. “But if it was me, I’d want every advantage I could get. I sure wouldn’t send some half-starved . . .”

“You made your point,” Hauk interrupted. “We’ll take care of it.”

“Ha!” Rehme yelled. “Wouldn’t you know it’d be the last goddamn one.”

He creaked open the cage door, and hurried back down the rows of equipment. He got a leather survival holster, and started sticking various items into it.

Hauk looked at Plissken, then stared down the aisle to see where Rehme was. “Look,” he said, voice low, “I know I’m not in any position to ask you for favors . . . but I’ve got a . . . relative inside.” His voice was hoarse. “You’ve got priorities here, I know, but if you could just . . . keep an eye out for him.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do, Hauk. Ask three million crazy people for their names and addresses?”

The man waved it off. “No, damnit. I don’t need to know anything except if he’s there.” He held up a clenched fist. “He’s got a tattoo.” He pointed to his four fingers just below the knuckles. “The letters H-A-U-K, one on each finger.”

Plissken frowned. It’d be a cold day in Miami Beach before he did a favor for Hauk, “Well, if I see him, I’ll tell him to drop you a line.”

Hauk’s eyes flashed for a second, but he didn’t say anything.

“Here we go,” Rehme’s voice said. He came back through the cage and locked the door. Standing on the business end of the counter, he dumped the contents of the holster onto its top. It was a large, wraparound holster, compartmentalized, like an electrician’s. It could hold a lot.

The guns were the first thing that caught the Snake’s attention. There were two automatics, a handgun and a break-down rifle. Plissken hadn’t held a gun since Leningrad. He reached out and gingerly ran a palm over each weapon. They were smooth and cold. Deadly. Snake Plissken with a gun was like Samson with shoulder length hair.

“The bullets carry a charge,” Hauk said, thrusting his hands away from each other. “Explodes on impact. You don’t have to be a crack shot, just hit what you’re aiming at.”

“I will,” Plissken answered.

He glanced at the other items: a flare pistol, K-rations, a big crystal chunk that he assumed was amphetamine, infrared goggles and a small two-way radio. There was also a large, four-pointed metal spur

that looked sharp and lethal at close range. His eyes skipped over the tactical gear, always returning to gaze at the guns.

“Double his rations, would you?” Hauk said. “He’s a growing boy and he’s hungry.”

Rehme went back into the cage, this time remembering which key was which.

“I’ll need extra ammo clips,” Plissken said, unable to get his eyes off those guns.

Hauk noticed his interest. “Know how to use them?”

“Do rabbits have a sex life?”

Rehme came back in and threw some greenish brown tins on the counter. “Extra rations,” he said.

“And a few more ammo clips,” Plissken added, tabbing open a can of pound cake.

Rehme winked and reached into his jacket pocket. He dropped several loaded clips onto the counter.

Plissken nodded and stuffed the whole piece of cake into his mouth.

“It’s a whole different world in there,” Rehme said. “It’s very tribal, very survival oriented.” He leaned against the counter and looked at Plissken, deadly serious. The Snake smiled at him through his mouthful of cake.

“They split along race and ethnic lines. White, Black, Chicano, Indian, Oriental, European.” He took a breath. “It even breaks down farther: women, homosexuals, religious, old people . . . and the crazies. Some of them have cars. They took junkers left behind and converted them to steam. We think that they may also have a gasoline source in there. And power. They have it selectively, although God knows how they do it.”

“He does?” Plissken asked, swallowing the dry lump of cake.

“Who?”

“God.”

Rehme made a face and started talking again. Plissken listened with half an ear as he got into a tin of peaches. They thought they were telling him something. Plissken had been down so many roads that most of them were named after him.

“They have greenhouses, and rigged-up generators. Some areas even have street lights. The crazies live in the subways. They have full control of the underground.” He stopped because Plissken was slurping loudly on peach juice. The Snake stopped, looking at the man over the rim of the can. “The crazies,” Rehme continued. “They’re

night raiders."

Plissken set the tin back on the counter, wiping his mouth on the back of his sleeve. He sifted through the equipment laying in front of him. He held up a strange, round object with a push-button inset. "What's this?"

"Tracer," Hauk said. "Sends a radio signal for fifteen minutes. If you push it we can track you on radar."

Plissken held it between thumb and index finger, examining. "Had these in the Army."

"This one's different," Hauk said, taking it from him. He twisted the thing hard against itself. Half the barrel turned. "Safety catch," he said.

"Nice toy," Plissken returned and, picking up the peach can, he finished the rest of the juice.

"We could brief you for days . . ." Rehme began.

The Snake looked at him like a gambler looking at the tax man. "Let's just get it over with, huh?"

"Now just a . . ."

"The man wants to get it over with," Hauk said, his face hard. "By God, I'll vote for that. Pack up your gear, soldier, and well get underway."

Plissken started stuffing the equipment back into the holster. "Yeah, I could use some fresh air," he said.

He got the bulky pack filled and strapped it around his waist. Hauk was already walking out the door. He sauntered, at his own pace, behind the man. Hauk was finally forced to stop in the middle of the hall and wait.

"You mentioned the Gulffire," Plissken said. "Where in the hell am I supposed to land it?"

"Top of the World Trade Center," Hauk returned, and he didn't even flinch.

"Just like that," Plissken said.

"You're Snake Plissken, aren't you?" Hauk shot back. "Besides, it's the only place you can land." He started walking again. "They won't see you up there, and when you come back, you can take off from free fall."

Plissken chuckled softly. "You really expect me to make it back?"

Hauk ignored him and kept talking. "You can locate the President from his vital signs bracelet. It gives off a sync pulse. Use this."

Getting into his pocket, Hauk fished something out. He handed it to

Plissken, a small round object. It looked like a miniature compass. "Homing device," Hauk said. "It shows direction and distance."

Plissken eyeballed it once, then threw the thing into the holster with the rest of the gear.

They came to some stairs and went up. The surroundings were beginning to look familiar to Plissken. They had gone underground and ended up back in the in-processing bunkers where he had originally been brought.

He couldn't believe that Hauk would just give him a Gulffire and turn him loose. Judicious use of the jet packs and an expert at the rudder could give the Gulffire a virtually unlimited range. And Plissken was an expert.

Hauk took him into a small examination room set off to the side of a dimly lit, totally empty ward. His eye was throbbing worse than usual, but he knew that it was the combination of the rain and the proximity of all the black-suited slime. The pain in his side had settled to a dull ache that would form an ugly black and yellow bruise by morning—if he lived that long.

The examination room was just the same size as the steri-chamber. But in here, the table was padded and covered with a starched white sheet There was a cabinet in a corner, glassed in, but lockable. It was filled with small sealed jars of clear medicine. Next to that was a machine set on a table. It was not overlarge, but was literally covered with dials and gauges.

An old man with a rugged face and a white lab coat stood near the examination table. He was filling a syringe from one of the small medicine bottles. The man seemed disturbed about something; it translated into silence as Hauk and Plissken came through the door.

"Is everything ready?" Hauk asked, without a greeting.

The man gave Hauk a sidelong glance. "Yes," he said simply.

Then the old man wandered over to Plissken. It seemed to the Snake that the man was almost afraid to look at him—that he wanted to see him, but not to see him at the same time.

The man finished filling his needle, then just stood there holding it, like a hunter with his rifle grounded until something comes along to shoot.

Plissken gulped, feeling queasy. He wasn't much for shots. He disliked pain a lot more when he knew it was coming. "Is that for me?" he asked sheepishly.

"Strong antitoxin," Hauk said. "Stops bacteria and viral growth for twenty-four hours."

“Take off your jacket,” the man with the needle said. “Then roll up your sleeve.”

Plissken crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s okay,” he said. “Don’t need it. I’ll be all right. Really.”

“Let’s go, Plissken,” Hauk said.

“But I don’t like needles.”

“Plissken . . .”

The Snake sighed and slipped out of his jacket, letting it drop to the floor. He walked over to the examination table, hopping up backward to sit on it. He rolled up his khakied sleeve. The man with the needle came closer.

Trying to ignore the whole business, Plissken diverted his attention to Hauk, who had walked over to the machine with all the dials. He clicked some switches and a number lit up on the machine. 23:00:05.

He narrowed his gaze to take that in when he felt the sharp stab of the needle going into his arm. He grimaced slightly.

“Over in a second,” Cronenberg said in his best fatherly voice.

Hauk got into a small box next to the machine. He came out of it with a wristwatch. He walked back over to Plissken, setting the dial as he did.

“There,” Cronenberg said, and pulled the thing out of Plissken’s arm. “That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Then you sit down here and I’ll do it to you,” the Snake replied.

He was just into rolling down his sleeve, when Hauk strapped the wristwatch on him. It had a readout like the machine’s. Hauk pushed a button on the side. The readout light began blinking. 23:00:01. 23:00:00. 22:59:59.

Hauk watched the blinking numbers for a few seconds, then looked up at Plissken. He said: “Twenty-two hours, fifty-nine minutes, fifty-seven seconds.”

The Snake looked from the watch to the man’s face. It was a countdown watch. “We talked about twenty-four,” he said to the Commissioner.

Hauk looked at Cronenberg. It was the kind of look that said, get your ass as far away from me as you can get. The old man drifted to the other side of the room immediately and began fiddling with the machine.

Hauk turned his glacier eyes back to Plissken. “In twenty-two hours the Hartford Summit Meeting will be over. China and the Soviets will go back home.”

Plissken watched Cronenberg with his good eye. The doctor had pulled two long rubber tubes out of the back of the machine and was fiddling with them.

"The President was on his way to the Summit when his plane went down," Hauk continued. "He has a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. The tape recording inside has to reach Hartford in twenty-two hours."

"What's on it?" Plissken asked.

He watched as Hauk worked his lips against themselves. "Do you know anything about nuclear fusion?" he asked.

The Snake put up his hands. "Never mind," he said, "I don't want to know."

The doctor was walking back to the table, back behind Plissken. He had the tubes in his hands. They were attached to the machine, stretching back and bouncing like monstrous rubber bands.

"We're talking about the survival of the human race, Plissken," Hauk said, but it lacked conviction. "Something you don't give a shit about."

Cronenberg spoke from behind. "I'm going to inject you," he said dryly. "It'll sting for a second or two."

The Snake didn't have a chance to complain. He didn't even have a chance to ask the doctor what was going to be coming out of those two rubber tubes. The man just placed them quickly on either side of his neck and pushed a button. The tubes were compressed air guns. He felt a bite, then a pop, and for just a second it felt like someone was pinching the hell out of his neck. Then, just as quickly as it had come, the pain stopped. Cronenberg removed the tubes, and Plissken brought his hands up to feel the spots. They were tender to the touch.

He heard Hauk sigh and looked up at the man. His face had relaxed somewhat, as if some good and positive thing had just happened. "That's it, Plissken," he said.

Cronenberg's voice was cold as January behind him, "Tell him," the man said.

"Tell me what?" Plissken snapped.

Hauk moved across the room, almost as if he were physically needing to put distance between himself and Plissken. "About that idea you've got about turning the Gulffire around 180 degrees and flying off to Canada."

Plissken jerked his head around to Cronenberg. The man's face was pasty white. His eye began twitching madly under the patch. "What did you do to me?" he demanded.

"My idea," Hauk said from the other side of the small office. He was

puffed up, trying to look big and mean. He was out of practice. “Something we’ve been fooling around with. Two microscopic capsules lodged in your arteries. They’re already starting to dissolve.”

He took his eyes from Plissken and paced his corner of the room in a tight circle. “In twenty-two hours, the cores will completely melt. Inside the cores are small heat-sensitive charges. Not a large explosive, about the size of a pinhead. Just enough to open up both your arteries.”

He stopped walking, turned his head and stared hard at the Snake. “I’d say you’d be dead in ten, fifteen seconds.”

The pain charged through Plissken’s eye, and he was off the table, jumping toward Hauk. He hit the man hard, hand in a death grip on his throat. The momentum carried them back to bang into a concrete wall. Hauk groaned loudly.

“Take ’em out!” Plissken screamed, squeezing hard on Hauk’s neck.

Eyes bulging, breath caught in his throat, Hauk had his pistol out, jammed into Plissken’s stomach. But the Snake was well beyond that. He’d go gladly if he could take Bob Hauk along with him.

Plissken was vaguely aware of Doctor Cronenberg beside him. The man was shaking visibly, mouth working. He was talking. Plissken picked it up with half an ear, then listened to it all.

“They’re protected by the cores!” Cronenberg was yelling. “But fifteen minutes before the last hour is up we can neutralize the charges with an x-ray.” His hands were on the Snake’s arm, touching, gently touching. “We can stop it, Snake. We can stop it!”

Plissken looked at a gagging Hauk, then at Cronenberg’s deep worried eyes. He released the man’s throat.

Deep, husky sounds came from Hauk, as he staggered away from the gray wall, hand up on his throat, massaging. He holstered his gun.

Plissken tried to swallow the anger back down to the boiler within him. He looked at the watch. It read: 22:47:01.

Hauk was taking deep breaths. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. “We’ll burn out the charges . . . if you have the President.”

Plissken glared at him. “What if I’m late?”

Hauk straightened his tie. “No more Hartford Summit. No more Snake Plissken.”

Plissken bent down and picked up his leather jacket, draping it over his arm. He was calm again, thinking, adjusting. He stared fire at Hauk. “When I get back,” he said, “I’m going to kill you.”

The Commissioner accepted that at face value. He even smiled

slightly. “The Gulffire’s waiting,” he said.

X

GULFFIRE COUNTDOWN
22:13:36, :35, :34 . . .

The rain had dissipated to a fine mist, the kind that you never really feel until you run your hands through your hair and come away wet. It was chill, autumn chill, and the misty rain seemed to act as a coating, sealing the chill right into the bones.

Plissken walked alone down the deserted airstrip toward the distant hangar, the hangar lights casting long, shimmering reflections on the lonely puddles beneath his feet.

There wasn't a blackbelly in sight. Normally, that would have made him happy, but the fact that he was left unguarded made him feel that they accepted him as one of them. He couldn't think of a single thing more disgusting to him in the whole world. It also tended to reinforce Hauk's assertion that they actually had planted bombs within him.

There he was, Snake Plissken, going back off to war. Of course, he had never stopped going off to war. Every hour of every day of his life, Snake Plissken fought his battles. Sometimes they were internal, and sometimes they were wild and freewheeling like at the Federal Reserve. But the feelings were just the same.

None of it made any sense to him. What was one President more or less? What was one summit meeting? It was a President who decorated him after Leningrad, a President who thought he could buy his love and loyalty with a cheap slug of bronze and a bit of colored ribbon. It meant nothing to him. Less than nothing.

That was a different President, of course. How many had there been since—four, five? It didn't matter; there were plenty more where those came from. When the medals didn't buy him off, they offered him a high position in the fledgling USPF. When that didn't work, they cut him loose, just gave him a discharge and sent him home.

Home.

Orange fire.

He felt the anger bolt through him and fought it back down. He

needed his wits about him now. He came up to the hangar, pushed open the huge, sheet-metal door and went inside.

It sometimes occurred to him that maybe he was crazy like the rest of them. Although crazy people, it seemed, would not realize that they were crazy. Everything would seem perfectly logical and natural to them. That was the one feeling that made him think he was still shuffling the right deck. He could look around him and know, really know, how out of control the whole business was.

The inside of the hangar was lit with that creeping neon disease. The glider sat in the middle of the monstrous hangar, its only occupant. He crossed the cement floor, footsteps echoing loudly. Two cops were under the plane, taking the blocks out from in front of the wheels.

He got up to the machine and felt his insides surge. It had been a long time. The Gulffire was sleek and bullet-shaped. It was painted slick black and the neon script reflected in lazy, distorted patterns off its contours. The wings were stubby. The jet pack stuck a bit out of the tail like some kind of metal beehive. The canopy was black, flat black. It was all instruments, no eyeballing. He was surprised to find himself getting excited about flying again. He had thought he was through with it. But old soldiers never die . . .

"You Plissken?" came a voice from under the glider. The voice got caught in the echo and rebounded off the high walls until it sounded like a whole choir shouting down at him.

"What's it to you?" Plissken returned, softly enough to avoid the echo.

The blackbelly was out from under the plane and standing beside him. Another head popped up on the other side of the fuselage. Plissken fixed the man with his good eye. All of the hatred came through, and probably more than a little of the pain.

The hard creases in the man's face softened. Turning his head, he spoke to his partner. "Let's get this thing outside," he said.

They rolled it toward the big doors. Plissken walked with them, a hand on the sleek side, trying to get the feel back. He didn't worry too much. He figured that it was like sex: once you got the rhythm, you never forgot it.

The blackbellies got the glider out of the hangar, and went to look for the truck and tow line. He waited until they were a distance away before jumping up on the wing and easing back the canopy.

He climbed in and immediately slid the covering closed. There was a second of total darkness, then the life-support and preflight lights came up. He could hear the air hiss as he looked over all the green

and red lights that blinked the board before him, and after a few seconds the bottled air made it cold in there. Cold like the grave.

He sat, letting the sterile cold seep into his body, letting it become a part of him. It *was* like the grave, like the best part of the grave—the peace. He envied Bill Taylor just a little.

Reaching out, he began playing with toggles. Screens lit up in a panorama around him, filling the cabin with an eerie blue glow that was tinged with green around the soft edges. More toggles, and the geometric outline of the runway and surrounding area lined out on the screens.

He watched the outline of the tow truck pulling onto the runway, then saw the unreal stick figures of the blackbellies jumping out to hook on the tow line. He could feel the vibrations through the hull as they scraped the clamp against the glider to hook him up. Then they were waving their little stick arms obliquely at the canopy.

Okay, he thought. *Fine and dandy.*

He toggled the mike. "I'm ready," he said.

Hauk's voice came back to him immediately. "Twenty-one hours," it chided.

"You don't have to remind me," he snapped back. Then, "Suppose he's dead? If I come back without him do you burn these things out?"

There was a pause, a shot of static. When Hauk's voice came back up, it sounded odd. "If you bring me the briefcase."

The words hit him like a wrecking ball on a brick building. "The man means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

"Get them both back, Plissken."

"Yeah," he answered. "I'm on my way."

The truck's radio was tuned to their communication. When Plissken got through, it started up immediately and began dragging the Gulffire down the runway.

He watched the speed build up on the dial, and his own spirit began to gear up with the acceleration. He took hold of the stick, felt the vibrations as the glider strained against the gravity that wanted to keep it chained to the ground. When he and the glider were ready, Plissken eased back on the stick and watched the outlines on the screens drop off the bottom and disappear as if they never existed at all.

He was up; he was free.

The urge was there to kick in the jet packs and put as much distance between himself and Hauk as he possibly could. It was almost as if

getting away from the source of the madness would somehow kill the madness. It wouldn't, though. He eased around forty degrees and headed for Manhattan Island.

Almost at once, the outline of the city appeared on the screens—distant, but not that distant. He found a thermal and bought himself some height. He was just seeing the tops of the buildings, and was closing in on them. A red blip appeared on the top of one of the outlines, flashing quickly, urgently.

Hauk's voice on the radio, breaking the beautiful silence. "Are you picking up the target blip?"

"Right on course."

He slid silently up on the cold empty towers, closed in on the City of Death. He lit a cigarette and dragged on it without pleasure. The buildings were right on him. He dipped down to their height and began aiming himself between them, testing his reflexes.

"How's your altitude?" Hauk's squeaky voice asked.

Plissken made a handsign at the radio.

"If you need to get higher," Hauk said, "use your jet engine."

Plissken sighed. The man wasn't going to leave him alone. "Too much noise," he replied.

His good eye drifted to the screen, went wide. It was filled with the outline of a huge building. It was there, right there.

"Damn!" He jerked the stick hard, tilting, nearly rolling. The building filled the screens, then listed crazily, finally sliding off the screen.

He moaned and sat back, removing the cigarette that he had bitten nearly in two. "Been a while," he mumbled.

"What—what's that?" came Hauk's voice.

"Nothing," Plissken returned.

He checked his instrument heading, made a small correction and once again, the target blip was on the screen. He evened the altitude and aimed for it.

The updraft from the buildings was creating turbulence. The stick began vibrating in his grasp, wanting to jerk to one side or the other. He got a tight grip on it with his right hand, then with both hands. The plane began rattling, the instrument panels jiggling out of focus. He could feel it in his legs right through the floor, then his whole body.

Then the whole plane was buffeting, shaking madly like it wanted to come apart. His insides were jangling and the pain shot through his

head like orange fire.

The blip was coming closer, growing large on the vibrating screens.

Hauk's voice. "Plissken . . ."

The glider was creaking loudly, banging, threatening to come apart all around him. And still the blip grew.

"Plissken . . ."

He was one with the vibrations. He was the beating heart of the living glider. The blip was filling the screens, overfilling, spilling blue lined light onto his body.

"Plissken, what are you doing?"

He could barely talk through his chattering teeth. "Playing with myself, you bastard. I'm going in!"

A buzzer sounded his proximity to the target. He pushed the stick violently forward, nosing down fast. He hit, bouncing, bashing the immutability of the building. The wide roof spread out before him on the screens.

He was moving fast, much too fast. He jammed his feet to the floor, locking the wheels, hearing the whining screech as they tried to grab hold of the pavement. He punched the flap button and they sprang up, more resistance.

He lost control with the flaps. He was spinning. Whirling through the vortex. The stick was useless. He let it go and punched up the anchor.

It wasn't much, but it was the only shot he had left. The glider shuddered as a section came out of the tail. He braced himself, clamping his teeth tightly closed.

The anchor grabbed the cement and held. Then the violent jerk as its line pulled taut on the careening machine. The plane screamed all around Plissken and he was thrown forward, despite his preparations. His mind keyed to a crash. It never came.

There was deadly quiet all around him. He didn't move. He just listened to the pounding of his own heart.

"Plissken . . ."

Something was wrong, though. He was resting at an angle, nose pointed up. Every time he moved, the glider wobbled. He decided to move very carefully.

"Plissken . . ."

Reaching out gingerly, he flipped off the switches one by one. The screens went black. Then slowly, oh so slowly, he unbuckled.

"Plissken?"

He unlatched the canopy and slid it slowly back. He was looking up into the rain/gas clouds. He stood and looked out The whole tail section and one wing were overhanging the edge of the building. The only thing keeping the glider where it was, was the nylon rope attached to the anchor.

“Plissken, come in.”

Climbing out was done by inches. The Gulffire shuddered with every movement. He got a foot out on the wing, nearly slipping on its wet surface. Then his other leg. He reached back and closed the canopy, shutting out Hauk—for once, having the last word.

He slowly slid down on his hands and knees and edged himself along the slippery wing. The glider moved as he did, tilting up slightly with his weight. When he was safely above the roof, he rolled off the wing to the cement, the Gulffire creaking back to overhang the edge again.

The wind was high up there; it was enough to cause the whole building to sway. He got up and, leaning into the howling beast, made his way toward the outside door.

Spread out all around him was the City of Death: dark towers, many ruins, pockets of light trailing wispy gray white smoke into the crying sky. And sounds. Not the sounds that he usually associated with cities. These were animal sounds, banshee screams and low-down growls and jungle drums beating maddening rhythms. Plissken’s hand automatically went to his holster, reassuring.

He passed the carcass of an old heliport control shack, viewport window gone, inside charred and gutted. The door housing was set about fifty feet past the heliport. He moved to it quickly.

The door was battered, hanging on one hinge. Stepping back a pace, he kicked at it. The force tore it off the remaining hinge, and it fell back inside, sliding noisily down the stairwell to rest against the bottom door.

Plissken followed it down . . . into Bedlam.

XI

WORLD TRADE CENTER
19:22:45, :44, :43 . . .

The hallway was long and dark. He raked its length with the flashlight before proceeding. There was no sound, except the moan of the wind blowing through the dark tower's glassless windows.

He felt relatively safe up there. At well over a hundred stories, very few people, even crazy people, would be willing to spend the hours it would take to walk that many stairs. It was a nice view, but not that nice.

It was probably time to get in touch with Hauk so that the man wouldn't get his bowels in an uproar. A doorway was to his right; he looked in, playing the light around the shadowed corners before entering.

It was an old office that looked like the scene of a riot. The windows were gone, large frags of glass scattered over everything. What furniture there was, had been overturned and ripped to shreds in ways that rational human beings would never think of. The wind whistled in three octaves through the windows.

A large desk was overturned in the center of the room. He got it back upright and sat on its edge, swinging his legs. Lying the flashlight down to spotlight the wall, he got into the holster. Bringing out the small pocket radio, he telescoped the antenna.

Frowning once, he flipped the switch. "I'm inside the World Trade Center," he said. "Just like Leningrad, Hauk."

Hauk's voice came back through the thing, loud and screeching. It blared, forcing Plissken to hold it at arm's length.

"IS THE GLIDER INTACT?"

He pulled it back to himself, trying to adjust the volume knob. But it seemed to wheel freely, not attached to anything. "It's okay, I guess," he said into the thing, still turning the knob. "But taking off is for shit. I'll work it out."

The voice blared back, probably filling the whole floor. "YOU HAVE TO USE THE STAIRWELL. IT'LL TAKE YOU AWHILE TO GET DOWN

TO STREET LEVEL. CALL ME WHEN YOU'RE OUTSIDE . . ."

Plissken shut off the radio just to get away from the sound. Nothing like a quiet entrance. He could almost think that Hauk gave him that radio purposely. He shook it off and climbed off the desk. He'd deal with Hauk later. After.

He put back the radio and routed through the pouch for a minute. He came up with a foil-wrapped package the size of a golf ball. Unwrapping it, he removed the contents—a block of crystal meth, looking like a chunk of rock candy.

Knocking it on the desk, he broke it into several chunks, the largest of which he picked up and tossed into his mouth, swallowing it dry. The poison bitter taste slicked a gully along his tongue and trailed in stringers down his throat.

He wasn't tired yet, but he'd be needing his share of go-fast just to get down those stairs. Putting the rest of the meth back into the pouch, he moved cautiously into the hall.

He played the light down the hallway until he saw the exit sign at its end. The stairwell. As he moved toward it, he thought he saw the flash of a moving shadow ahead, but when he got to the spot, there was nothing.

The stairway door was gone. He started down.

It was a hell of a long way.

About six floors down, the speed took hold and began jerking his body to a new metabolic rhythm. He picked up the pace. Every floor down had its own landing, then the stairs would turn back upon themselves and go on for another landing. Each landing was a new world.

There were bodies on the landings in various stages of decomposition. Some without heads, some just heads. There were the remnants of campfires long past, piles of animal bones, probably dogs and cats, scattered through the ashes. The smell was always bad and often overpowering. Plissken found a roll of gauze in his survival kit and wrapped it around his nose and mouth in several layers to keep out the smell. It didn't work very well.

It took longer to get down than he could have possibly imagined. Even with the meth, it seemed like he was destined to descend stairs for the rest of his life. The steps finally terminated in a small hallway.

He unwrapped the gauze and threw it aside. Then he moved forward, slowly, with care. He was on street level then, in the thick of it. The hallway ended with the building's lobby. Plissken stood in the entryway, letting his eyes roam the shambles that spread out darkly

before him.

Afraid to use the flash, he made out the lumpous forms of broken and overturned furniture through bits of dim lighting that filtered in from outside.

There was a flickering orange glow climbing on the wall farthest from him that formed strange, jumping shadows. Unable to make out the source of the light because of a dilapidated information desk, he began creeping toward it.

The smell reached him first. Food cooking—meat. It was mixed in with the smell of charred wood. He moved agilely, catlike, around the helter skelter destruction of the room. His eye hurt, always hurt, but the speed had somehow anesthetized the ache in his side. He reached the information desk and peeked over its top.

Three men were seated crosslegged around the small fire. They were roasting a straggly cat on an umbrella shaft. They were talking too low for Plissken to hear.

They were stripped to the waist, and something the color of rust was smeared over their chests and faces. They had waist-length hair that was held in place by headbands. One of them had green and yellow parrot feathers stuck in the band to make a crude headdress. Indians.

Their weapons lay close at hand, long knives that glinted in the firelight, hand-fashioned bows and quivers of arrows made from the shafts of fishing rods with ten-penny nails stuck in the ends. A long pole lay beside them, leaning against the shadow-jumping wall. At first Plissken thought that the things hanging from it were the pelts of small animals. Then he realized what they really were—human scalps.

He was backing away from the desk when he heard the snap of wood. He flared around and one of the shadows had pulled away from the room of shadows and was hurtling through the air toward him.

There was no reaction time—an Indian, screaming, was on top of him. His screams charged the atmosphere, icy and inhuman, and his eyes were wild and glazed.

Plissken went back with the man, but didn't fall. The Indian held his hands up taut, holding piano wire stretched between them. The throat was what he wanted. In flashes, Plissken watched the humming wire vibrate toward him. He got his hand up at the last second to protect himself.

The wire twanged on his hand—F# above middle C. It tightened the hand against his own neck, strangulating, cutting deeply into the side of his palm. The arms tightening the noose were impossibly strong, the strength of madness.

They pulled him backward. He went with it, forcing the flow, not fighting. When he connected with the man's body, he jammed back with his free elbow, plunging hard into soft belly flesh.

The Indian's scream turned to a gurgled choke and the man doubled over, releasing his hold on the wire. Plissken was around on him instinctively, his arm way above his head. He came down hard, like thunder on the exposed Indian neck. And even the choking stopped as the madman went to the demolished floor like someone had cut his string.

Plissken was off and running down the first corridor he saw. The shouts of the other Indians filled the hollow hall to cacophony all around him. They were too close.

Without turning or looking, his hand went to the survival pack, closing on the wide mouth barrel of a flare pistol. Still running, he got it out and cocked the less than precision hammer; he wheeled, skidded to a stop and fired.

His assailants were less than twenty feet behind him. The phosphorous ball whooshed from the barrel, exploding the hallway in brilliant light. It hit the floor, popping loudly, streamers of white-hot burning light squirting everywhere like a fountain, or like the Fourth of July. The Indians, in bold relief, lit to washed-out white, dove for cover. And Snake Plissken was off and running again.

The corridor ended in a metal door that looked like it had never been opened. He charged toward it, cocking the pistol again. Then, on a dead run, he fired. The door went up, blasting right out of its frame. On its other side, black night.

Plissken was through the door, in an alley. He just picked a direction and ran—free—at least for the moment.

Reaching the end of the alley, he skittered into the tangle of concrete jungle that was the city. He ran another block, two blocks, until he was sure that he wasn't being followed.

Then he climbed the cracked, broken steps of a dead brownstone and squatted down in the shadows of its entryway. The building was intact for a floor above him. The rest of it was a pile of bricks and pretzel-twisted steel girders. Much of the block was bombed-out in the same way. It looked like the place where all the old buildings came to die.

He took his breath in measured doses, his eye roaming the deserted streets for enemies. It *was* a jungle, and he was both predator and prey in the chain of survival. There were no rational systems to apply here, no codes, no ethics. There was only life and death.

He wiped a hand across his sweat-streaming face and reached into

the bulky holster. His rifle was in two parts. He took them out and snapped them together without looking; his eye was busy with the crumbling streets. The pieces locked together with a solid click, and he let his hands linger on the gun’s contours for just a second before reaching into the pouch for a clip of ammunition.

The ammo slid in slowly, sensuously, and locked into place. Snake Plissken stood up full and primed the bolt. He tucked the weapon under his arm and strode resolutely down the steps. If he had to survive here as an animal, let it be as a lion.

He moved into the street and turned around full. In the distance a wide avenue was filled completely with smoke. The plane. He moved toward it, eye wary, always watching.

Junked cars filled the street. He moved past each one carefully, checking for surprises. When he reached the smoke, he put on the ruby goggles and his field of vision became ghostlike; negative images drifted dreamlike before him. He felt removed from his body, like a spirit observing an unreal landscape.

Reaching into the pouch, he removed the tiny homer that was keyed to the President’s bracelet. Nothing. He wasn’t close enough to the source yet.

He kept moving through the smoke until he caught sight of the diffusing light from a dying fire. He moved toward the place. First he came to chunks of burned, twisted metal and scattered wreckage. Then a wheel. Then a seat—it was sitting upright, pretty as you please, right in the middle of the street. Something was strapped to it: it was a glob, an oozing broken glob. He had to assume that it had once been a human being, since he couldn’t imagine what else could have been strapped to a seat like that.

He moved on.

Most of the plane was in one spot. It had smashed into the building and then slid down its side, taking huge chunks of steel and concrete down with it. It had exploded at least once, and what had been a tail section was nothing more than a blackened hole. Part of the cabin remained intact, and the white fire came from in there.

He looked through one of the port windows. The whole inside of the cabin was charred black, fire apparently having flashed through the heavily oxygenated atmosphere to scald everyone in a matter of seconds. The bodies were black things, stiff and twiglike. The fire that still burned within the cabin was electrical, as wiring from reading lamps continued burning and shorting.

Plissken turned from the window and took off the goggles. His good eye caught movement and he turned toward it. A hunched figure,

dressed in rags like a scarecrow, hobbled out from behind a section of the tail and scurried quickly into the blessed shadows. Plissken watched the human vulture gimp away, knowing that he would probably come back later to feed on the remains in the cabin.

Sitting on the twisted bulk of a wing, he got the radio back out again and turned it on. “I’m at the plane,” he said softly, eye still wandering. “Nobody made it”

He was startled by a beeping sound. “Wait a minute,” he said, looking down at the homing compass. It was flashing a tiny red light, northeast on its dial.

He slid off the wing. Looking down at the dial once again, he let his eye drift in the direction indicated. He was looking down a narrow, smoke-filled alley. He began to follow, moving slowly at first, then faster.

As he walked, he brought the radio up to his mouth. “I’ve got his pulse,” he said. “Right up ahead. It’s moving, to the . . . northwest.”

Hauk’s voice, loud, deafening. “YOU HAVE TO GET GOING, PLISSKEN . . .”

“Damn!” He shut off the noise and looked around. If there was any attention to attract, he did it. He picked up the pace and looked at the lifeclock strapped to his arm. It read 18:30:23, then changed to 18:30:22.

XII

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

18:17:34. :33, :32 . . .

It was the only building with any light on the whole block: an old theater, its jutting marquee blank and shattered, reflecting the state of the art.

Plissken came up on it slowly, using the line of gutted, rusting cars as cover. The front was all boarded up, glass long gone, as a defense against the elements. Hard yellow light peeked through the cracks between the boards, escaping into the night in tiny, narrow shafts.

He looked at the homer. The blip was pulsing, pointing directly at the theater.

Moving in a crouch from between the cars, he ran up into the shadow of the boarded ticket booth. There were muffled sounds coming from inside the theater which sounded like music.

Darting from cover, he got right up to the window slats, listening. There *was* music . . . and laughter. The sound was small and far away, but it definitely was coming from within. He bent down slightly to try and look through the cracks in the wood, when suddenly a boarded-up door flew open right next to him.

He tried to melt back into the shadows, rifle ready, but it didn't matter; the man coming through the door was moving in the opposite direction. He was wearing a tattered top hat and tails. He wore no shirt, and his trousers were missing from the knees, trailing long stringy frays.

He wobbled as he walked, and was muttering under his breath. He flung the door wide and staggered off. Plissken grabbed the door before it closed and, hiding the rifle behind his back, moved into the building.

He was in the lobby of an old-time movie palace. Once a jewel, it was now a rhinestone. Its red carpeting was faded and water-damaged; the candy counter had been smashed to glittering slithers and long ago looted; its aquatint wallpaper was disfigured with large brown water rings and hand-painted obscenities. The lighting was dim; the gassy odor of kerosene lamps mixed with the carpet mildew

to make the place smell like some sulphurous bog.

A small man wearing a filthy one-piece sat perched on a high stool near the door—the ticket-taker. His little round head was bent forward, lolling around on his chest. He snored lightly, easily. Plissken saluted him quietly and moved past him, toward the sounds.

He walked through the lobby, past the ragged curtains on the auditorium door and in. It was a big place, with enough seating for hundreds. The walls were lined with torches, big things with jumping orange fire on their ends and ugly black smoke curling from their tops. A hole had been cut through the ceiling to the outside to vent the smoke, and it rolled along the ceilings to tumble through the opening like a reverse drain.

Plissken looked at the stage. There was a chorus line of grizzled old men in outrageous female drag. They had linked arms and were kicking high as they sang:

> "Happy days are here again.
> The skies above are dear again."

The band played in the orchestra pit, fiercely, intently: an out-of-tune piano, a section of jew's harps, a few crudely fashioned stringed instruments that pounded out the sound. Off key, out of control, but music. It filled the hall, bottoming the singing voices, strengthened by the jumping feet that pounded the wooden stage.

> "Let us sing a song of cheer again.
> Happy days are here a—gainnnnnnn!"

He let his eyes rove the audience. There were about twenty of them—most of them were old, all of them out of luck. About half were asleep, heads rolled to the side, feet up over the seats in front. They looked comfortable, like they were born and raised right in those seats. The rest were shouting at the people on stage, laughing as they'd trip and fall. Their voices twisted with the singing, beating out the rhythm in time with the throbbing torches.

This wasn't where the President was. Plissken looked some more. There was a man seated toward the back, listening intently, foot tapping with the beat. Almost like he felt the heat of that single, searing eye on his neck, he turned to stare at the Snake. His face was large, expansive, his hair thinned to nothing. His circumstances were apparently better than the others, because he wasn't nearly as emaciated or dirty-looking. But that wasn't the strange part. When he stared at Plissken, it seemed to the Snake that there was recognition in

the man's face. Some sort of familiarity.

The hint of a smile slowly seeped across the man's face. Plissken tightened the slash of his mouth and started to move toward him, when a hard shot bolted pain through his shoulder.

He sagged with the blow, but didn't go down. It wasn't that hard. He came around to face it slowly, grimacing, keeping the gun behind him.

A large man stood before him. He was a bullet head: no neck, sloping, hairless skull. His eyes were dull, lips thick and twisting. He had a large, gnarled club in his hand that he kept slapping into the palm of his other hand. Splat. Splat.

Beside him stood the little man from the front door. And he looked scared, more scared of the man with the club than of Plissken.

"How'd you get in here?" the big man asked, and his eyes were two pissholes in a snow bank.

Plissken was rotating his shoulder, trying to work the pain out. "The front door," he answered.

The big man turned to the ticket-taker, moving his whole body around as if his lack of a neck made it impossible to turn his head any other way. The little man was trembling.

"What the fuck is he doing in here, Boyle?"

Boyle gulped, eyes darting, looking for a way out. "Musta slipped by," he said, just because it was all he could think to say.

The man with the club shook his head, his body turning with it as he did. Then, without warning, he swung out viciously with the thing, knocking Boyle to the ground.

"Okay, okay!" the man on the floor said, arms up to protect his face.

"Get back on that door!" the big man yelled, and the man crab-scurried across the floor back into the lobby. "You can be replaced, you know," he called after him.

The big man turned back to Plissken and began beating the club against his hand again. "Two cans to see the show," he said. "Three cans for a seat. Another can to sleep in it." He held out his beefy paw, raising the club with the other. "No loitering."

Plissken heard the homer beep and looked down at it. It was still pulsing, dead center in the dial. He brought the rifle up and jammed it in the big man's stomach.

"You'll have to excuse me," he told him.

The man froze, club raised, like some statue in a horror wax museum. Jack the Bopper. Only his eyes moved, and they were

cruising, running up and down the length of the barrel.

Plissken smiled quickly at him and moved into the shadows at the side of the auditorium. Keeping his eye on the big man, he moved down toward the front.

It didn't make sense that the President would be kept here, but the homer kept contradicting his sense. He got up by the stage and turned his head toward it. When he turned back, the big man was gone. It didn't matter.

He climbed the steps to the side of the stage. The old men were taking turns doing elaborate stripteases to some grind music coming from the Jew's harps. They were intent upon what they were doing, deadly serious, fulfilling their avocation in life.

Plissken slipped around the worn maroon velvet of the stage curtain and worked his way around backstage. It was dark back there.

He got out the flash and slid the beam around. There was bare floor running back to a red brick wall. Toward the back, by the wall, was a stairwell leading down to a basement.

Moving to the stairs, he heard sounds. A faint light glowed from below, so he shut off the flash and started down the steep metal stairway. He kept an eye on the homer as he descended. If the thing was right, the President had to be in this cellar.

He heard a sound behind him and swung around with the rifle. The man from the auditorium was staring down at him from the top of the stairs. He had a rugged, ugly demeanor, and he grinned all the time. Plissken couldn't tell if the grin was friendly or sadistic.

"You're Snake Plissken, aren't you?" the man asked him.

Plissken stared at him, tried to burn him with his eye. The man just grinned, showing a couple of missing teeth. He seemed to have a childlike way about him, an eagerness.

"What do you want?" Plissken asked in a monotone.

The man shrugged, with his arms and with his big, ugly face. "Nothing," he said. Then his eyes narrowed. "I thought you were dead."

The Snake turned from him and started back down the stairs. He wanted to put distance between himself and the grinning man.

"Hey," the man said to him in a loud whisper. "You don't want to walk down there. Snake."

Plissken ignored him and continued on. The basement was damp, and the Snake shivered through his jacket. A few torches jumped their flames on the cinderblock walls. The place was piled full of theatrical junk: horses' heads in papier-mâché, racks of costumes and stacks of

facades—the shadow of reality.

At the far end of the room were four men, leather boy rockers, trapped in the fantasy of a dream long dead. This was their place, the perfect place for them. Their hair was bleached blond and crew cut. They were shaved clean, and big, wraparound sunglasses hid the madness in their eyes. They wore all leather, and big jack boots. They all looked just the same, like quadruplets who had been brought up in a closet somewhere. Crudely rolled cigarettes bounced wildly between their lips as they talked, and filled the cellar with musty haze. They drank cloudy liquid from clear bottles. Their movements were jerky and erratic.

He walked quietly toward them. They had a woman down there with them, and she must have been drinking from the same bottle that they were. Her hair was unkempt; her clothes torn and dirty. She may have been pretty once, but it was impossible to tell under the layers of insanity. Plissken moved closer to hear their words.

"He's the King, you know? I don't care what youse say."

"But, he's dead, man. Been dead and stinkin' for a long time."

"You better watch that talk, man. The King don't die. He just flaked out to one of them South Sea islands somewhere, that's all."

"He O.D.'d, turkey. O.D.'d on the fuckin' terlet."

"Did you see the grave, huh? Did you get down and look in the GD grave?"

"Well, shit no. I . . ."

"Then don't give me none a' that dead crap, okay?"

The woman was giggling hysterically, giggling like she'd just learned how to do it and was having the time of her life. The rockers began shoving her around, one to the other, and she giggled that much louder.

They began tearing at her clothes, shredding them as she bounced around the group.

"Oh, mama," they'd call, and buck their hips at her while she bounded around, but it was all play-acting in the theater basement. It was an act, frozen in space and time; madmen acting the way they thought real people acted.

Plissken started to move past them, through a door that stood beside them. They stopped dead, staring. The woman, unaware that the game was over, kept bouncing around without being pushed, tearing at her own clothes.

One of the punks moved to block Plissken's way. He reached into his belt and pulled out a scissor blade.

The Snake took a breath. “Not now,” he said.

The man regarded him without expression. His face was slick and lifeless, a wax face. “Precisely now,” he said without moving his lips.

Plissken shouldered his way past the punk, and caught the movement as the man’s blade arm plunged toward him. Tensed, ready, he sidestepped the swing, and came around hard with the metal butt of his rifle. He caught the man flush on the side of the head, sending him reeling to the cement floor, his glasses skittering out of reach. The bouncing woman tripped over the fallen rocker and fell, laughing, atop him. The others backed into the shadows, not willing to carry the drama to its logical conclusion.

“My glasses,” the fallen man whimpered. “Where are my glasses?”

Plissken got down in the man’s face. “He *is* dead,” he said softly, and straightened up.

He moved through the door and into the boiler room. He started moving through its dark recesses and nearly tripped over a form sitting on the floor. It was an old bum. From his looks, he had been a bum way back when the city had been a city. He was good at it, a professional. He wore a long wool coat and a fuzzy hat. Plissken stirred him out of whatever place bums went to when they were sitting on boiler room floors.

“Hey, Chief!” the old man said. “Nice night.”

Plissken ignored him, taking in the measure of the room with his flashlight. The man began brushing off Plissken’s boots with the arm of his coat.

“Nice boots,” he mumbled. “Nice boots. Spare some food, Chief? Just a can, just a can . . .”

The flash caught other faces, grim and waiting. Other bums, a platoon of old men, taking their survival wherever they could find it. They moved up to Plissken, brushing him off, hands all over him. Then he saw it—the glint of a knife.

The Snake whipped around, rifle butt face high. They fell back as a man, unwilling to accept conflict from a superior animal. The bum on the floor froze, eyes slowly drifting up to gaze into the hate-filled stare of Snake Plissken.

The rifle slowly lowered to point at him. “Easy, Chief,” the man said, getting to his feet. “I’m walking. I’m walking.”

Then, as if that had been some kind of signal, they all rushed back into the shadows.

Plissken moved on. He hated this. He was a visitor in the Land of the Dead, a one-eyed Dante in the lower levels of hell. He wanted to

run back to the Gulffire and head it out to sea where the sun could shine sparkling diamonds on the clean, clear water.

He kept walking.

The boiler, a large silver cylinder, took up the whole center of the room. Plissken got around it and heard a muffled commotion. He beamed the light. A man, huddled in a corner, was being beaten by a dirty bum in a raincoat. The man was dressed in a brand new sharkskin suitcoat. He was bunched up in the darkness, but his arm was out in plain sight—the monitor. He was wearing it.

Plissken charged the man, banging full into his assailant. The bum fell, grunting, and crawled away.

Bending down, Plissken rolled the man over. “Mister President . . .” he began.

The man came into his light. He was a toothless drunk with more wrinkles than an elephant’s knee. He smiled stupidly up at the Snake, then, in gratitude, held out a clear bottle filled with a liquid the color of egg yolk.

Snake Plissken stood up. If this was the President, the country was in worse shape than he thought.

XIII

THE BOILER ROOM

17:54:47, :46, :45 . . .

The man was grinning up at him. “I’m the President,” he said happily. “Sure, I’m the President.” He pointed down at the vital signs bracelet. “I knew when I got this thing I’d be President.”

Plissken grabbed him by the lapels and shook him. “Where’d you get it?”

“That’s no way to talk to your chief executive,” he said with indignation.

“Where’d you get it?”

The man wiggled away from his grasp. “Woke up,” he said. “There it was. Like . . . like a miracle.” His eyes got far away.

The anger was all over Plissken. He grabbed the man’s arm and smashed the bracelet hard against the wall, shattering it.

“Does this mean I’m not President anymore?” the drunk asked.

Bob Hauk sipped coffee out of a paper cup, and it hit his already gurgling stomach like liquid fire. He had never been able to handle coffee very well; it was like a hand closing over his heart. But it did keep him on edge, kept his senses right there and ready. He grimaced and took another sip.

Things hadn’t worked out at all well with Plissken, but that was something that they’d both have to live with. The man was destined for prison anyway. Why should he expect any more than what he was getting?

He looked around at the bank of machines that surrounded him in the bunker, listened to them clicking and whirring in their own little machine language. He wondered what the machines thought of all this, and if that’s what they were talking about.

He heard Prather’s voice behind him and it chilled his blood. “Oh, Jesus . . .” the man said.

Hauk turned so quickly back to the monitor that he sloshed coffee

all over himself. There were people blocking him from the screen. He pushed his way through them.

The signals were wobbling on the screen, distorting. Then they went in an explosion of static, leaving behind a band of clear, straight light. The room hushed to total silence.

Doctor Cronenberg pursed his weathered lips. “It may be just an impact on the mechanism itself,” he said, but he didn’t sound as if he believed it.

Then the radio crackled with Plissken’s voice. “Hauk!” it said angrily.

Hauk flipped the switch on the transmitter. “I’m here, Plissken.”

“I don’t know who you assholes are looking at,” the voice returned, “but it’s not the President.”

He looked at the blank speaker grill, then turned to look at the blank faces that surrounded him. Then a voice, another voice, came through the speaker. It was singing:

> “Oh boo-tiful, for spasses skies.
>
> For amber waves ’a grain.”

Turning down the radio noise, Hauk looked over at Prather. The man, no matter how upset he got, always looked just right, like he had stepped out of an ad for a men’s store somewhere. “Now what?” Hauk asked.

The Secretary didn’t even blink. “Your man’s still got some time left,” he returned. “Have him keep looking.”

“It’s a big city, Mister Secretary.”

The Snake’s voice replaced the singer’s on the radio. “All right, get your machine ready. I’m coming home!”

Hauk took a deep breath. He looked at Prather. The man nodded sternly at him. He toggled the switch, “Eighteen hours, Plissken.”

“Listen to me, Hauk,” the voice said. “The President is dead. Somebody’s had him for dinner. It’s all over.”

Hauk set his jaw and said what he had to say. “If you get back in that glider, I’ll shoot you down. If you climb out, I’ll burn you off the wall.” He stared at the unanswering speaker. “Do you understand me, Plissken?”

The voice came back low, almost pleading. “A little human compassion,” it said.

The coffee felt like it was trying to burn a hole right through Hauk’s stomach. His heart was on fire, sizzling, crackling. “Plissken,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Get moving.”

Plissken, very slowly, very carefully, slid the antenna back into the radio. The pain was coursing through his eye, but he ignored it. He carefully placed the radio back into his holster. The man with the President’s coat wobbled to his feet. The Snake didn’t try to stop him, so he took that as a good sign and began to move off.

“Thank you,” he mumbled. “Thank you very much.”

Then he was gone, leaving Plissken alone with the hollow non-op boiler. So, that was how it was. The lay of the land. The hoot in the hollow. The way the wind blew. He had less than eighteen hours to find a man in the largest city in America with only three million maniacs to get in his way. Child’s play.

He rapped his knuckles on the side of the boiler. It came back, a deep, tinny echo. The way his insides felt right now, he could most probably take just a little of his own internal fire and stick it in the boiler to heat the entire building.

They had sent him home, but there wasn’t a home to go to. Some crazies had taken his home and held his parents hostage. The USPF didn’t care a whole lot about that; they just went in with their flamethrowers and took out everybody. They buried his parents together in a paupers’ grave, then the state took away all their savings. They tied them all together with the criminals and said that their money would be used for “restitution.”

The day that Snake Plissken came home, he blew up a state vehicle with a Molotov cocktail. It was the only thing that made him feel any better. He had done something of the like every day since then.

He wandered around the basement until he found an exit. There wasn’t any quit in him; he just didn’t know how. Maybe that was the beginning of insanity.

The night was getting colder. The speed was flapping his body like a marionette. He reached into the holster and ate another chunk, then another. There was no reality to adjust to here. Perhaps a chemical infusion could make it all seem logical, kind of like drinking yourself sober.

It seemed that square one would be the best place to start. So he retraced his steps from the theater and went back to the plane. The

smoke had dissipated to a fine powdery spray and the jet, covered as it was by pieces of fallen building, was beginning to look like a part of the landscape. Someone had taken away the seat with the body strapped to it. He didn't much want to think about that.

He saw the emergency pod imbedded in the building. He left the plane and went over to it. It had already been stripped bare. The chute was gone, the inside totally gutted, leaving nothing but a metal shell.

Standing away from the sphere, Snake Plissken drank in his surroundings. Streets branched off in several different directions, all blowing trash, whistling the fall wind, the air colder as it blew across the rain puddles. The streets were jammed with dead cars, wheel-less wonders. He picked a direction at random and started walking.

The streets were silent and deserted. No vultures now. No one. He didn't like it. Every jungle had its nocturnal predators. He tucked his rifle more securely under his arm.

Then there was a sound, the clank of metal on metal. He stopped walking and listened, trying to decide whether the sound was real or just a product of the massive doses of methamphetamine that was bolting his body like chain lightning.

It came again.

He turned slowly around, tensed, ready. Not ten feet from him, a manhole cover was inching slowly upward. Plissken primed the rifle and sank into the shadows.

The cover eased up slowly, then fell back again. There was deathly silence for several seconds, then all at once the lid literally flew off the hole, like the stopper on a bottle full of expanding gases.

A head appeared, or rather, the caricature of a head. The face was dark, brooding; it was incapable of flexibility, like a mask made of human skin. It was a filthy, smeared head, hair plastered with the wet gook that encased it so that it was impossible to tell where the hair ended and dirt began. The eyes were wide and staring, unblinking.

Mist rose with the head, and noxious gases—like potato rot. Plissken felt revulsion climb up his spine as the head became a whole body that slithered out of the underground, crawling along the cracked and broken streets. The body was naked, covered with slime. The stench was odious, nearly overpowering, and Plissken had to fight to keep from gagging.

Another ghoul followed the first, then another. Some naked, others in rags, all covered with putrid slime and open, running sores. The crazies. Glassy-eyed demons from the vaporous pits of hell, up to make a mockery of the word human.

They moved down the center of the street, open gasping mouths breathing shallow, pleuritic rasps. Growls. They were the borderline, the netherworld between life and—what? Death? Surely death would be the long lost brother to them all. They were hungry, foraging for fresh meat.

He tried to move, to put distance between himself and the obscene devil dance that lined out down the street. But they kept coming, more all the time.

His legs didn't want to work. He forced all his concentration on them, trying to squeeze the waking nightmare from his charging brain. Still they came, an army of them. The smell rose in quivering waves from the streets to laugh at the rumbling heavens.

Finally he moved. Slow steps at first, faltering, like a child learning to walk; then faster, more sure. He finally turned his head completely from the spectacle and raced through the long shadows, toward the dubious safety of the buildings.

They were everywhere then, filling the streets with inhuman gurgles. He came to a coffee shop, still relatively intact amidst a block of destruction. No door, glass gone from the windows. As he raced inside, he caught sight of the name above the door: CHOCK FULL O' NUTS.

The inside was dark, but he dared not turn on the flash. The place was stripped bare except for a counter that remained intact toward the back. He moved toward it, stopping when his foot creaked loudly on the tile floor.

He looked down. Much of the tile was ripped up, the floorboards were rotted, some of them were missing. Darkness stretched below the floorboards, cavernous darkness.

Moving slowly, carefully, trying not to make noise, he made his way toward the back of the building. He heard a noise outside and stopped dead, frozen in his tracks. The crazies were running now, drifting shadows, floating past the window space, driven by some internal rhythm, some perverted pathological inner vision.

He heard their bare feet slapping the concrete outside. Reaching a wall, he flattened himself against it, breathing hard, and not from the exertion. More shadows—they played the walls, even the shades of their reality distorted to incomprehension.

And then they were gone. There was quiet, and even the calm became a source of horror.

"You a cop?" whispered a voice.

Plissken jumped, swinging around. He brought up his rifle, arm

shaking, to point into the darkness.

A woman sat in the shadows, staring at him.

"No," he answered in the same whisper.

She was young, and cleaner than the others he had seen. She had definitely been pretty once, still was, but her eyes commanded her whole face now. They were deep, sunken eyes. They were eyes that had seen too much, eyes that had survived all the great disasters of the world. He couldn't look at the woman without being hypnotized by the pain in those eyes,

"You got a gun," she said.

More shadows flew past. Plissken jerked his head to the sounds.

"Got a smoke?" she asked.

He turned angrily to her. "Would you shut up," he whispered urgently.

"They won't see it," she returned. "It's all right if we're quiet."

He looked at the woman, then back outside. Moving quietly over to her, he pulled a cigarette from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. Getting back in the pocket, he fished around until he found a lighter, then handed it over, too.

The woman nodded to him, then turned her back to light it, shielding the orange glow with her body.

She took a deep drag, and gave back the lighter. "Hey, this is a real one!" She looked up at Plissken, fixing him with those pain-filled eyes. "You just get in?"

He squatted down on the ground with her, wanting to talk low. "What's going on out there?"

She pulled gratefully on the cigarette, obviously happy to be sharing her space with someone who didn't want to eat her. "Crazies," she said. "End of the month. They're out of food."

She pulled on the cigarette again. Plissken stared at the glowing end. "Keep your hand over it," he said harshly.

She did as she was told. "My name's Maureen," she began, as if they were strangers on a train off on holiday somewhere. "I got caught on the street after dark. Now I'm stuck here all night."

Plissken split his time between watching her cigarette and the broken windows. "Plane crash," he said, talking every time his head turned back to her. "Eight hours ago. Near Eighth Avenue. Jet came down. You see it?"

She shook her head, totally disinterested. "No."

Plissken slumped down, exhaling deeply. Another dead end and God

only knew how long he would be pinned down.

"You're a cop," she said,

"I'm an asshole," he returned.

"With a gun," she said sternly, twisting her face. "Who are you?"

He didn't even look at her. "Snake Plissken "

She sounded surprised. *"You're* Snake Plissken?"

"Yeah."

"I heard you were dead."

He reached out and clamped her hands around the cigarette again. "I am," he answered.

She just held the smoker, forgetting it completely. "What are you doing in here with a gun?"

He was watching her cigarette, watching the barrel of ash get longer and longer on its end. He couldn't believe that an ash could get so long without falling off. "Looking for somebody," he said.

"Who?"

The long ash fell off, drifting in pieces to the floor. "The President," he said, and glanced up to find that she was staring at him. "Our President."

Maureen, who got caught out after dark, shook her head. There were some things that even an inmate in the New York Penitentiary wouldn't believe. "Come on," she said.

Plissken shrugged. He didn't give a damn whether she believed him or not "That's it."

"He's really here?"

He made a sweeping gesture with his leather-clad arm. "Somewhere," he replied.

Maureen slid closer to him, touching with her body, side connected with his from shoulder to ankle. He liked it; it felt good. There could be worse people to be trapped all night with, worse people to be the last to touch in your life.

She cuddled close and put a hand on his arm. "And when you find him, you're gonna take him out?"

"Yeah," he said.

She touched his leg with a soft, gentle hand, dredging up some long-forgotten ritual practiced back when there had been rituals, a million years, a million life-times ago. She feather-touched up and down his leg.

"Take me out with you?" she cooed into his ear.

He played the game with her, played human being for just a little while. “If you give me reason to.”

Taking his face in her hands, she kissed him deeply. The lips were there, the tongue, but the passion was gone, burned out by too much chaos. “I can think of lots of reasons,” she whispered after breaking the pretend kiss.

All at once, she sat up stiff, horror-filled eyes wide, darting like an animal’s. She froze, listening.

Plissken heard it, too—a faint rustling from below, scratching. “Put it out,” he whispered.

Maureen stabbed the smoker against the wall, killing It. They heard another creak from below. Maureen was up, moving toward the door to the kitchen.

“Don’t move!” Plissken rasped.

A loud snap. Suddenly the floorboards gave way. A slimy, gnarled hand shot through the boards from below. The smell. The smell!

Screaming, Maureen went for the kitchen door. The floor cracked around her, rotted boards giving under her weight. She fell, gasping, right through the floor, disappearing waist down into the darkness below. Her face transfixed by fear, she scrabbled at the floor, clawing her way back up. Plissken moved toward her.

“Give me your hand!” he yelled, trying to break through the wall that her face had become. “Give me your hand!”

He was reaching, grasping for her.

The floor was giving way. Hands punching up, grabbing, ugly long-nailed charades of hands. They grabbed her, leaving slime trails on her clothes. Plissken began swiping at them with the rifle butt, but it was no use.

Screaming, Maureen disappeared down the hole, dragged down, leaving behind a long trail of scratches, grooves dug into the floor by her fingers. Hands still reaching. Screams turned to gurgles.

Sounds behind Plissken. He turned. A figure had pushed up through the floor to climb up. It stared at him with boring animal eyes, face unrecognizable through the crud that encased it. Long stringy hair dripped oozy globs, steam rose from the putrid body. In the hand—a long, gleaming ice pick.

XIV

CHOCK FULL O' NUTS

17:29:55, :54. :53 . . .

Revulsion pushed through Plissken's body, squeezed out by the survival instinct He clenched his teeth, aimed the rifle and began backing away.

Another sound. He turned quickly. Another crazy had come up behind him, through the hole that had swallowed Maureen. Then another.

Plissken moved without thought, bolted for open ground. He vaulted the counter, then charged past the big hole and into the kitchen. They were right behind him, hollering.

He got through the dark, gutted kitchen to a hallway beyond, racing at top speed. A door swung open at the hallway's end and more crazies poured in; shadows against the darkness, bottling him up.

Turning on instinct, he smashed, shoulder first, through a door in the hallway. They were closing on him, foul breath on his neck, hands grabbing.

He was in a storeroom, charging through it. Faint light seeped through a glassless window at the far end. He ran to it and jumped through. There were more of them on the streets, drawn to the hunt.

The fire escape was set by the window, a rusted iron ladder jutting down. Swinging up the rungs, he started climbing.

The crazies were there, smelling blood, right behind him. They grabbed at his legs as he climbed, and he kicked viciously back at them.

Reaching the first landing, he dove through the window, shattering what glass was left in it. They were streaming up the ladder; they kept coming, always coming.

He grabbed an old dresser and shoved it in front of the window, then pushed the frame of a bed to block the room's door, bracing it firmly under the knob.

No good. The dresser rocked in the gray-black darkness. The legs began jumping, scooting across the floor. A hand came around it,

scratching at the wall, looking for a hold.

Bringing up the rifle, Plissken pulled the trigger, muzzle flare lighting the room crackling white. He fired two, three times, and the hand on the wall exploded in blood and fire.

The hand severed at the wrist, its own gore tacking it to the wall. Plissken's eye got wide. On the fingers of the hand, just below the knuckles, were tattooed the letters: H-A-U-K. The hand began sliding down the wall.

With a loud, prolonged crack, the door splintered behind him. He turned. The dresser fell from the window with a crash. He jerked back. A crazy leapt through the place.

Plissken charged, bringing the rifle butt down hard on its head. The thing flopped to the floor, its body jumping like a grounded fish.

Another immediately filled the window space. The door fell completely behind him, bulging inward. It flew off the hinges, bed and wood scraping across the floor. Four of them filled the doorway.

They were all over him, coming through windows and doorway—hands, arms and drool-snarling faces. The smell was choking, suffocating. He swung out with the rifle, using it as a bludgeon. They screamed aviary sounds and grabbed at him. And the darkness closed all around him. And they *were* the darkness.

Through the trellis of arms he saw a doorway to his left. His arms were pinned, his gun. Finger on the trigger, he fired, time after time. They fell away from him, going down in pain. He broke away and went for the door. The bathroom. Getting through the door, he closed and locked it just as their pounding began on the other side. It was shaking, rattling with the force of their blows. It wouldn't hold long.

There was no more time for Snake Plissken. In desperation, he turned to the tile wall, leveled his blood-caked rifle and emptied the clip, yelling in unison with the deafening rattle of the gun.

Wood and ceramic chips flew back at him, shrapnel and plaster dust filling the tiny room with white, powdery smoke. The banging continued on the door, locked in dreadful symphony with the exploding wall.

He ran the gun empty, and the dust settled. He had broken a hole through to the next apartment. He looked to the door; it was already beginning to splinter and crack.

"Son of a bitch."

He jerked the clip and threw it down with the clutter on the floor, then pulled another from the holster and shoved it to the lock into the bite.

Turning, he raked the door with bright flashes, then jumped through the opening he had cut for himself. Running through the shell-shocked remnants in darkness of the next apartments, he jumped without hesitation through the still-glassed window of the place. It exploded on impact, and Plissken fell into darkness.

It was one floor to the ground, and he reached it at the same time the glass did. He came down hard, rolled and was on his feet and running, the gut panic cancelling any pains he may have sustained in the fall.

He was in the alley, rain puddled, glistening slick. A high brick wall filled his vision at the end of the street, another obstacle. He never broke stride.

The screams were behind him again. He pumped, the wall getting closer, looming larger. There was no stopping now. He came to it on a dead run and jumped, his arm grabbing for a hold at the top of the thing.

He got it, scrambled over and risked a look back. They filled the alley behind him, pouring out of the building, still coming. He started over, then his eye caught something lying on the ground where he had jumped.

It was his radio, smashed on the pavement below. It must have jarred loose when he went up the wall.

He jumped down the other side and was running again, feet splashing sprays of dirty water up his pant-leg. He ran a block, two. He looked over his shoulder. The crazies had climbed the wall and were scrabbling over, the energy of their madness matching his chemically induced vigor.

The mouth of the alley lay a half block ahead. He went for it, trying to keep his pace strong and even. Then he heard a sound, distant, but drifting closer. Music. It was music. An amplified twang, rattling the night.

There were words with the music, easing up. A brash voice, loud with anarchy.

> "Got the time for . . .
> gettin' even.
> Got the time for . . .
> gettin' even."

Something slid up to block the alley. A car. No, a cab, a yellow cab. Plissken put on the brakes, skidding into the side of the vehicle. The music was coming up from inside.

"If I plot . . .
If I plan . . .
Like as not . . .
Sure I can."

A head poked out the cab window, a big, ugly face with an obscene, grinning mouth. It was the man from the theater.

"Where you goin', buddy?"

Plissken looked hard at the man, then back down the alley at the crazies who were a block away and closing fast. There was no time for thought, no time to determine whether or not he could trust the man.

He grabbed the handle and pulled it. The cab was battered. It looked like it had been dropped from a ten-story building, then hammered back in shape. The headlights were strapped on the fender. The windows, glass long-gone, were heavily barred. The faded yellow paint job was scarred by deep gouges and long, raking claw marks. Perfect. The Snake jumped in the back seat.

The cabbie turned to grin some more at him. "Bad neighborhood, Snake," he said, and reaching beside him on the seat, picked up a peaked cap with a black bill and put it on his head.

Plissken turned to stare down the alley. The crazies were getting closer and closer.

"That's what I'm for . . .
Proper time for . . .
get, get, get,
gettin' even."

"You don't want to be out walking this neighborhood at night," the cabbie said. "No sir."

The man's picture, faded and cracked past recognition, was stuck to the visor. There was a meter stuck to the dash, and clear bottles filled with amber liquid and rag-plugged tops sat beside the man in the front seat. Cocktails. And not martinis.

The crazies were half a block away, their screams nearly drowning out the music.

The cabbie lit a cigarette and took a deep, satisfied drag. "I've been a cabbie for thirty years and, let me tell you, you just don't walk around here and live to tell the tale." He shook his ugly head, frowning, for once, to make the point. "No sireebob. They'll kill you and have you stripped to the bones in ten seconds flat. I'm usually not

down here myself. I wanted to see that show."

Plissken put a squeezing hand on the man's shoulder. The crazies were nearly on top of them. "Let's go," he hissed.

The cabbie, smiling again, picked up one of the bottles off the seat. He touched his smoker to the rag plug. It burst into flames, licking the cab ceiling. He held the bottle out to Plissken, shaking it.

"This stuff's gold around here, you know," he said.

The crazies hit the car, on the run. Shaking, clawing, reaching. The cabbie casually tossed the bottle out the window and it exploded in their midst, flaring fire.

The front ranks went up in flames and the smell of burning flesh stood out even above their slime stench. The cabbie hit the gas pedal, and the car screeched away from the conflagration, swerving on down the street.

Plissken watched the orange fire disappear out the glassless rear window, then sank back gratefully in the seat. The aches and pains began to creep up his body the moment he relaxed. He took some more speed out of his pouch and ate it.

The cab was moving at top speed down the deserted streets, the driver taking obvious delight in being able to do things he could have never done when the city was a city. The buildings lay in ruins all around them, crumbled, decimated.

"When'd you get in, Snake?" he asked over his shoulder. "I didn't know they caught you."

He took a corner too fast, screeching around, back end fishtailing. Plissken fell over partway on the seat. He was already forgetting about the crazies and remembering how short his time on Planet Earth was going to be if he didn't find the President.

The driver was still talking. "Snake Plissken in *my* cab," he said proudly. "Wait'll I tell Eddie."

He turned around, grinning quickly. "Hold on, Snake!"

Turning the wheel hard, they swung into an alley, the cab going up on two wheels, nearly toppling. The cabbie was laughing, enjoying the hell out of himself. Plissken wondered if he would have been better off back with the crazies.

"Gotta take a shortcut to get out of here," the man was saying. "You can run into real trouble on the streets." He shook his head. "Night before a food drop, hell! Forget it." He started laughing again. "Hey, Snake. Watch this!"

They sped through the alley, then took another hard right, throwing Plissken to the other side of the seat. His gratitude was slipping

quickly away.

They tore through the empty streets, through the darkened towers of glass and stone.

“See her take that turn?” the cabbie asked, and his voice was high-pitched and excited, charged by his own mad adrenal glands. “Hell, I had this very cab before I got sent up. I locked her up before they walled us in. When they sent me back in, she started right up, like nothin’ changed.”

> “And I’m tryin’ soft
> And I’m tryin’ hard
> Sneakin’ round to catch ’em
> All off guard
> Can I do it
> anonymously?
> Can I do it?
> You just wait and see.”

“Three years,” he kept saying. “Three fuckin’ years, and she started right up. What a beauty.”

Plissken was through with it. He just didn’t have the time. “Hey,” he said.

The cabbie jumped, startled. It was almost as if he’d forgotten that Plissken was back there. “What were you doin’ back there. Snake?”

“Looking for somebody,” Plissken answered coldly.

“Shoulda asked me,” he said. “I know everybody in this town. Been driving this cab for thirty years. This very same cab. Did I tell you that she started right up. After three years, she . . .”

Plissken jammed his rifle into the back of the cabbie’s neck. “Now, just shut up for a minute!” he said angrily. “I’m gonna ask you a question, and you got one second to answer.” He took a deep, rasping breath. “Where’s the President?”

“The Duke’s got him,” the man answered matter of factly. “Hell, everybody knows that. Sure, the Duke’s got him. Gee, Snake, you don’t have to put a gun to my head. I’ll tell you.”

“Who’s the Duke?”

The man’s head turned sideways, eyebrows up in surprise. “The Duke of New York!” he said. “The big man. A-number-one, that’s who.”

“I want to meet this Duke.”

The cabbie started chuckling again. “You can’t meet the Duke. Are you crazy? Nobody gets to meet the Duke, he’s the big guy. You meet him once, then you’re dead.”

Plissken pushed the rifle barrel a little harder into the man’s neck. “How do I find him?”

The cabbie shrugged his hands off the wheel. “Well, I know a guy who might help you. He’s a little strange, though.” The man stopped talking long enough to take another drag on his cigarette. “Gee,” he said at last. “You didn’t have to use your piece on me. I woulda told you.”

“One more thing,” the Snake said.

“Yeah?”

“Would you please slow this son of a bitch down?”

XV

150TH ST. MEMORIAL LIBRARY

17:10:19, :18, :17 . . .

Plissken watched the streets as they drove. The cabbie droned without thought or meaning, talking in laborious detail about lube jobs and oil changes. The streets seemed infinite, caught as they were in the middle of their tangles. Twisting stone paths winding a petrified forest. An army, a hundred armies, could hide within those hollow trees.

They cut through a narrow alley, as scrawny rats fled the jabs of their headlights. Then, about halfway along the dark pathway, they stopped.

"Well, here we are," the cabbie said.

"Where?"

"Here. Come on."

The man creaked open his door and hefted his bulk out of a broken seat that had cradled him for those thirty long years. He looked up and down, hitched up his grease-stained pants and smiled.

"Can't leave her on the street," he said. "Usually don't leave her at all. But you're a special case, Snake."

Plissken climbed cautiously out of the back seat and followed the cabbie down the length of the alley and out. They were moving toward a huge stone building that was relatively intact. Wide stone steps led up to the big, iron doors. Cement lions crouched by the steps, guarding this stone palace in the stone jungle. They started up the steps. It was a public building, a library.

"It's okay. Snake," the cabbie said. "Better neighborhood. You can relax."

Plissken thought about the time bombs planted in his arteries. "No thanks," he replied.

They got to the top of the steps and the cabbie banged on the iron door with the flat of his hand. It echoed hollowly, like knocking on a huge bell. He waited a few seconds, then did it again.

He smiled at Plissken, his eyes gleaming slits. "They got a great

place here. Like a fortress."

"They?" Plissken returned.

A voice from the other side, female, said, "Who is is?"

The cabbie rolled his eyes and cocked a thumb at the door. "It's me!" he yelled, loud enough to wake up the dead—or at least the walking dead.

"Who's me?" returned the muffled voice.

"Cabbie!"

"What do you want?"

"Somebody to see Brain," he said officiously. "It's important."

"Go away," the voice returned.

Plissken grimaced and started looking for accessible windows.

"It's Snake Plissken," the cabbie returned, then winked in the Snake's direction.

There was a pause. The magic words, the passport to the asylum. Sounds, scratching sounds, came through the door. Locks slid, bolts scraped. The door opened a crack. An eye peered through.

"You're Plissken?" came the voice connected to the eye.

"He wants to see Brain," the cabbie said.

"Why?"

Plissken shoved the cabbie aside and got eye to eye through the door crack. "I want to meet the Duke."

The eye stared, unblinking, at Plissken for a short time. It wiggled, looking up and down. Then the door closed softly and they could hear the rattling of chains. Then the big door slid quietly open.

Plissken stepped through and looked at the woman. She was clean, head to toe—clean face, clean clothes, clean fingernails. The clothes looked new, and fit her well-filled frame like they were made for it. She had dark hair, mid-thirties hair, but her eyes were younger. Plissken fell into those eyes. They were liquid and inquisitive and more than a little mischievous; and he couldn't detect even a touch of madness in them. Well—maybe a touch.

She looked him over, too, and when she was finished, the corners of her mouth turned up a notch. Like a smile. Or maybe like a sneer.

She made a gesture with her arm toward some stairs that led down into the great hall of the place. Cabbie jerked his head and they started down, the woman staying behind to relock the door. The place was huge, a lifeless cavern. The ceilings were high enough to be swallowed up completely in the darkness. A few torches lit the walls,

trying to warm the cold, bleak marble that gave the place its deathlike chill.

They got down the stairs and waited. Cabbie put an arm around Plissken's shoulder. The Snake shrugged it off.

"Brain's the greatest. Snake," the man said. "Mister Fabulous. The Duke loves him."

Plissken turned to the sound of footsteps. The woman was coming down the stairs, a torch throbbing in her hand. He watched the yellow light caress her body.

"Who's that?" he whispered to the cabbie.

"Maggie," he answered. "Brain's squeeze."

She was almost down the steps. The cabbie leaned close so she wouldn't hear him. "The Duke gave her to Brain, just to keep him happy."

That Plissken could understand. The woman walked up to them. She used the torchlight to look him over again, and this time, the look in her eyes was *all* mischief.

"I heard you were dead," she told him.

He frowned. Maybe everybody else knew something that he didn't.

She led them down the hall. They went through an ornate archway to enter a large room lit to semi-light by well-placed, flickering lanterns.

Hooking the torch on a holder by the arch, Maggie led them into the room. It was the reading room of the library, shelves stuffed with books, stacks of them everywhere, piled high. They were all covered with a thick layer of gray-white dust.

There was a sound, a generator noise that got louder as they walked farther into the room. They came around a row of shelves and Plissken saw the source of the noise. A generator stood right in the center of the room. It ran a belt drive system that operated a pump, and the shaft of the pump was plunging up and down into a hole cut right through the floor—their own oil well, probably sucking gas or crude oil right out of an old underground storage tank somewhere.

Plissken was looking the well over when his good eye caught something else. On a near wall was tacked a large map of Manhattan. A figure stood before the map, well-dressed, like Maggie. He turned around. He was thin and brooding, but obviously well-fed. He wore a long, shaggy beard that covered a laughable, baby face. He stared at Plissken, then flicked out a thin tongue to lick dry lips.

"Brought someone to see you, Brain," the cabbie said.

Plissken took in the man, studied him in the dim light. His bad eye was twisting the nerves under the patch, trying to get his attention. He mentally removed the man's beard, and a tight-lipped smile stretched across his teeth.

"Harold Hellman," he hissed, low and menacing.

The man's eyes got wider. "Snake?"

"Harold?" Maggie squeaked.

Plissken eased his hand back on the rifle, back toward the trigger guard. "How have you been, Harold?" he asked. "It's been a long time."

"You never told me you knew Snake Plissken," Maggie said, obviously impressed. Plissken wondered what it was he did that people thought was so special.

The cabbie was laughing again, having a ball. "Isn't this great!" he said loudly, slapping his hands together. Then, "You know, Brain. If you could spare some more gas. I'm getting kind of low and . . ."

In a flash, Plissken had crossed the distance to Brain. He shoved the rifle's barrel right into the man's mouth. He started gagging around the thing. Maggie came forward to defend her man.

"Don't move or I'll spray the map with him," he said, never taking his eyes from his prey.

The woman stopped, muscles tensed. The cabbie sputtered behind him, undoubtedly wondering where his next gas was going to come from. Plissken moved his face to within inches of Hellman's.

"I'm glad you remember me, Harold," he said in that low voice. "A man should remember his past, don't you think? Remember Kansas City? Four years ago? Hmmm?" He shoved the gun in a little farther, choking the man with it "You ran out on me. You left me sitting there."

He pulled the gun out of Hellman's mouth and directed him to a chair with it. Fear overflowed the man's eyes like a horn of plenty. He sat.

"We were buddies, Harold," Plissken said. "You, me and Fresno Bob. You know what they did to Bob?"

The boiler threatened to explode in Plissken's gut. Life was a war, and Hellman was a traitor. He raised his foot and planted it on the man's chest. Kicking out, he knocked the chair back, banging it against the map. Hellman went to the floor with a grunt, sprawling there.

"Don't kill me. Snake," he whimpered from the cold marble.

“Where is he?” Plissken snapped.

“Who?”

“Don’t play with me!”

Hellman rolled over, lips trembling, beard bobbing with the vibrations. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! Jesus, Snake. Come on!”

Plissken crouched down, getting in his face. “Where is he?”

The man’s eyes were pleading, talking to a stone wall. “Why? Why do you want to know?”

“I want him, Harold.”

“The Man sent him in here. Brain,” Maggie said, and her voice was sharp, a razor blade.

Hellman tried to compose himself, tried to sit up. “Yeah,” he said. “Working with the Man now?”

“Wait a minute,” the cabbie said defensively, since he had his own axes to grind. “Snake don’t work for the Man . . .”

“Tell me, Harold!”

Hellman got into a crouch, then stood up slowly, his back sliding up the wall. “No,” he returned, using the woman’s strength of conviction. “And if you kill me, you’ll never find out.”

The Snake smiled again. “Too thin, Harold. Even for you.” He turned to glance quickly at Maggie. The sharp edge of her words was nothing like the homicide in her stare. He would have winked at her, but he didn’t have enough eyes. “I’ll just beat it out of your squeeze,” he said, and watched her face twist with hatred.

Hellman was talking faster now, selling his point. “Maggie doesn’t know exactly where he is, and if you don’t know exactly, precisely where he is, you’ll never find him.”

That made sense to Plissken. He’d already taken a look at the city. Maybe it was time to deal. He lowered the rifle.

“Is he still alive?”

The cabbie laughed loudly, brightening immediately. “Alive and kicking.”

“Shut up,” Hellman snapped.

Plissken walked to a chair and sat down. The others stood rigid, staring for a few seconds, then they sat also. “Okay,” he said. “Here it is. I’ll take you out of here. I’ve got a jet glider. It’s not far from here. You just get him to me.”

Maggie and Brain looked at each other. The hate began draining

from her eyes. She was thinking, revolving the possibilities.

The cabbie was out of his chair, pacing excitedly. He looked at Plissken and wiped a palm across his weathered face. “No kidding?” he said quickly. “On the level? You take me, too?”

Plissken gave him a why not look. What difference did it make? He only had room in the glider for two anyway.

Hellman looked hard at Plissken. “We got a deal somewhere else,” he said, still not understanding the man’s desperation.

The internal boiler started stoking again. “No glider,” he said.

“We got the President,” Maggie said, face as flat as Hellman’s words. “And the Duke’s taking everybody out of here.”

“It’ll never happen,” Plissken returned. He sat up straight, leaning forward. “I know something you and the Duke don’t know. You only got so long before Mister President don’t mean a whole lot to anybody.”

“Bull,” Hellman shot back. Then, his eyes narrowed. “How long?”

Plissken laid his rifle across his lap and put his hands behind his head. “You ready to work something out?”

“You’re lying,” Brain said.

Maggie looked at Snake, and her face was at war with itself. She was a survivor, too. “Maybe he’s not,” she said.

Hellman stood up and waved Plissken off. “I know him,” he said, turning his back to look at the map. “Look at his face, he’s lying.”

Somehow, that was all okay with Snake. He needed to take Hellman out anyway. The penalty for treason was execution. He raised the rifle and aimed at the man’s leg. If he was going to do it, he may as well do it slow enough to get some enjoyment out of it. “Guess I’ll just kill you and keep looking myself.”

Hellman turned, his beard bobbing again. “Christ, Snake. Come on. Come on!”

Snake Plissken put his finger on the trigger and hugged the rifle up snug against his cheek. He began squeezing, very gently.

“Brain!” Maggie yelled.

“Talk to him, baby,” Plissken whispered, and squeezed a little more.

“He’s gonna kill us both if you don’t tell him.”

“You gotta tell him. Brain,” the cabbie said, high and fervent. “You gotta!”

Brain Hellman looked deeply into Plissken’s good eye and believed. He withered under the heat of the look. He made the decision, and he

knew it was the wrong one. Turning back to the map, he bashed it with a fist. “All right,” he said, nearly a whisper. Then louder. “All right!”

Plissken, almost sadly, took his finger off the trigger and lowered the rifle. The pain in his eye eased somewhat. “Always knew you were smart, Harold.”

Hellman flared around angrily to him. “One thing right now,” he said, with as much vehemence as he could muster. “Don’t call me Harold.”

XVI

GYPSIES ON THE STREETS

16:45:21, :20, :19 . . .

Plissken trusted Brain Hellman about as much as he'd trust a pickpocket with his safety deposit box. That is, if he'd had a safety deposit box. The man was as slippery as Vaseline, and as loyal as a seeing-eye dog in a hamburger factory.

He had run with Hellman for a time, but had never felt like he could trust him. Hellman could do all the fast talking, but he was never there to back it up with action. Finally, in Kansas City, he had flat driven off in a getaway car, leaving Plissken and Fresno Bob inside a bank. The Snake slithered away. Fresno Bob wasn't so fortunate. The blackbellies caught him and skinned him alive.

"Got the best engine in the whole damned place," Cabbie was saying to Plissken as they waited for Hellman to lock up the library from the outside. "Made the rounds of the junkers and the parts stores and got the best shit available. Nothing too good for my baby."

His eyes were glittering, and he kept moving up close to Plissken, bumping him slightly.

"How far we got to go?" Plissken asked Hellman.

The man turned from his padlocking, and as usual, his face was poker steady, blank and wiped clean. "Nothing's far away in this town," he said. "Haven't you heard, we're on an island."

Maggie was standing by Hellman at the top of the stairs. She watched the streets constantly, the survival instinct. Occasionally, she'd turn to look at Brain as he wound the chains through the ornate brass handles on the door. There was an admiration in her eyes that could almost be interpreted as love. The Snake couldn't figure that one. Maybe the woman wasn't as sane as he thought. Whatever else Brain Hellman ever was, though, he was apparently kind to his women.

"Did the fine tuning with jeweler's instruments," Cabbie said, twisting his fingers as if he were using a tiny screwdriver.

"Got it," Hellman said, snapping the last of the big padlocks into place.

“Let’s go,” Plissken said, and waited while the others started down, so he could follow behind them just to be on the safe side.

“You work for this Duke?” he asked the Brain.

The man answered without turning to him. “Make gas for him,” he said, and every sentence came out sounding like it had been rehearsed. Hellman was still hedging his bets. “Figure out things for him.”

“Like what?”

This time the man did turn around. Plissken smiled. He wasn’t going to let the son of a bitch off that easily.

“Like how to get across the Fifty Ninth Street Bridge,” he returned finally, and he acted as if the words were being forced from his mouth with a crowbar. “It’s mined, but I think I know where they’re planted.”

Maggie spoke up, willing to talk as long as Hellman was. “We got a diagram from a guy who got all the way across before they shot the poor bastard.”

Hellman gave her a dirty look at first, but then just sighed, giving in. “They’re working up there now,” he said. “Clearing away the first barricade.”

“What a sight, Snake!” Cabbie yelled, coming out of his car fantasy. He started moving his arms out in front of him, rolling them like the ocean waves. “The whole place rolling right across the bridge. Mister President right up front.” He let his arms drop to his sides. “It would have been so fine.”

“Would have been?” Maggie said.

Cabbie shot her a fierce look, then said indignantly. “We’re goin’ with Snake now.”

“Wait a minute,” Plissken said, cocking his head. “Listen.”

They all stopped, and the sound was discernible to everyone. Engines. Closing in.

“It’s the Duke!” Cabbie yelled. “I know the sound of his machines.”

“The alley,” Plissken ordered, and they hurried down the remaining steps and around the corner of the building. They got quickly around, hugging the wall with their backs. Plissken turned his head. The cab sat about fifty paces farther down.

He turned back, and risked a look around the corner of the building. A convoy was coming up on them, consisting of ancient cars and trucks, sputtering and fuming through snorting clouds of gray and black smoke. The machines shuddered, backfiring white sparks,

wobbling from side to side. There were between ten and twenty in all, and every one of them looked as if it was on its way to the automobile graveyard. None of them had mufflers, and their ripping sounds tore the night.

The lead car passed the mouth of the alley, an old Cadillac with the top cut off. A man sat in the passenger side of the front seat. He was large and bald-headed, with three scars, like claw marks, running down the side of his cheek.

“The Duke,” Maggie whispered.

He had a cigar in his mouth and a pair of sunglasses to cover his eyes. The glasses were taped together at the hinges with white surgical tape. A lavender, almost purple, snap-brim fedora sat stiffly on his cue-ball head. He had it turned down stylishly over one eye.

The others in the car were obviously bodyguards. They were dark, like the Duke, and had droopy moustaches. Brightly colored bandannas wound around their heads, and their earrings were large and gold. They wore dark suits with dark shirts. Their faces were lined with cruelty. Gypsies.

The lead car passed and others went by, filled with Gypsies. Their exhaust smoke stuffed the alley with dirty fog and Plissken, by habit, covered his mouth and nose with his hand.

They grumbled along slowly, like a funeral procession,

“Don’t cross the Duke,” the cabbie kept saying, shaking his head. “Everybody knows that”

“Button it,” Plissken rasped. He grabbed Hellman by the shoulder, forcing the man to get eye to eye with him. “Is the President with them?” he asked.

“No,” the man answered, and the Snake couldn’t read through the granite of his eyes. “He’s stashed away at the Duke’s place.”

The caravan stopped in front of the library, but didn’t shut down their engines, probably with good reason. Plissken watched as a man with a deathshead face and chiseled teeth jumped out of the Duke’s car and took the steps up to the library two at a time.

“He’s looking for you, Brain,” Maggie said, as the man began pounding on the door the same way Cabbie had done.

“What does he want?” Plissken asked,

“My diagram to the bridge,” Hellman answered. “When he finds out I’m with you, he’ll kill me. Shit, Snake, I knew I shouldn’t have . . .”

“We gotta get the President now,” Plissken snapped, “while the Duke’s busy.”

Hellman shook his head with resignation. “Forget it,” he returned. “He’s on the other side of town and we got no wheels.”

“Sure we do,” Maggie said. “Cabbie,”

They turned to the cabbie, but he was gone, his cab, too distant for them to catch, was backing down the alley, its sounds muffled by the incredible timbre of the convoy. The cab reached the other end of the alley and backed quickly onto the main street, a tiny squealing sound drifting back to Plissken’s ears.

“Slime,” the woman muttered, and for the second time that night Plissken got to see the range of extreme emotions that could mold her face.

“That’s it,” Hellman said, and breathed deeply. “Deal’s off. Snake.”

“Just calm down,” Plissken told him, and held up the rifle just to let Hellman know that this wasn’t going to be a replay of Kansas City.

The last car in the caravan stopped right in front of the alley. It was an old station wagon, with bars welded on the window like the cab’s. It sat there, quivering like it had caught a chill. One of its headlights had come out of its socket and was dangling, waving at the ground. The man in the passenger side got out, cursed and moved to the front to fix it.

“Wait here,” Plissken said, and his tone told them that he really meant it.

He walked up the alley, staying in the shadows. Getting close to the car, he casually sauntered up to the driver’s window. The man turned to look at him, but all he really got to see was a close look at the tempered steel, combat-gouged butt of the Snake’s automatic. And he didn’t get to see that except for a second.

The butt of Plissken’s gun connected solidly, cracking, across the man’s nose and cheekbone. He went over on the seat without a sound, as if he had just decided to take a little nap.

Plissken opened the door, shoved the unconscious man over and got behind the wheel. The other Gypsy was squatting down in front of the car, still fiddling with the headlight. Plissken slammed the door and hunched down in the seat.

He heard sounds from the front of the car, heard the other man calling a name. Then he saw the man’s shadow drift lazily across the windshield.

The man was at the door, bending down to look through the bars. The Snake came up sideways with the gun butt, slipping it vertically through the bars. He caught the man’s mouth and chin.

The Gypsy gurgled, hands to face, backpeddling toward the alley.

Maggie ran out from the darkness, shoved the man back even more and cracked his head on the side of the building. He fell, splashing into a puddle. Maggie and Brain dragged him into the alley.

Laying his gun on top of the unconscious man, Plissken jammed the car into reverse and backed up enough to nose the thing into the alley.

He jerked to a stop in front of Hellman and Maggie. The Brain opened up the door and pulled the Gypsy onto the ground beside his buddy. Plissken grabbed his gun away just as the man was sliding out. Hellman climbed in front, Maggie in back and Snake Plissken screeched away down the alley.

"Oh shit," Hellman said.

"What?"

"I just sat in something . . . wet." He was raising himself up to look at his pants. The seat was soaked in blood. "Shit," he said again. And then again, just for effect, "Shit"

"Where're we going?" Plissken asked, pulling out of the alley and heading down a wide avenue.

"Well, ah . . . it's a ways from here," Hellman stammered.

"You're in this," Plissken said through clenched teeth. "All the way, Harold." He stared intently at the man, reminding him of the fire that burned out of control within. "We're like Siamese twins."

"Grand Central Station," Hellman said quietly. "They've got him at the station."

"Which way?"

Hellman pointed straight on. "This is okay for now . . . no, wait" He was wiggling his hand. "Turn left here."

Plissken squealed the brakes and took the quick turn. It was a big street, a huge street.

"Wait a minute, Brain," Maggie said. "This is Broadway."

"I know," Hellman answered grimly. "The Duke'll take Seventh Avenue. Broadway's got five minutes on him."

Plissken turned to the woman. Fear was molded on her face. He had never seen that emotion from her. "Brain, come on," she said.

Hellman set his face. "Keep driving," he said. "If we're going to do this thing, we may as well do it."

"What's wrong with Broadway?" Plissken asked.

"Just go."

He turned to the woman again. "What's wrong with Broadway?"

"Hoodoo," she answered, slumping back in her seat. And she

wouldn't say anything more.

Plissken kept moving his eye, watching. It was all right at first, but then they began seeing the fires, small fires, single fires burning here and there. They heard the drums, then the chanting, the deathly moan of the chanting.

"What the hell . . ."

The fires became more frequent and had been somehow treated with chemicals to make their smoke rise different colors: yellows and pinks and fine powdery blues, filling the street with drifting multicolored clouds. The stench of burning rubber drifted with the clouds.

Figures darted wraithlike through puffs of smoke—flitting, ethereal, always in motion, impossible to discern. The drums were loud, throbbing Plissken's eye, making him rock physically in the seat. And the chanting was a siren song, indefinable, magnetic. The parking meters lined the smoky streets in long rows, metal display poles topped—with heads. Human heads with open screaming mouths. Then the people were everywhere, smoke people, moaning. They moved slowly toward the car.

Plissken felt his stomach muscles tighten. "Come on, Sweetheart," he said and gave it as much gas as he possibly could on the smoke-filled street. They picked up speed, moving through the ever-growing street throngs.

Bang!

A rock hit the roof, then another.

"Oh God," Hellman said softly.

Then a barrage of rocks pelted the car from all sides, like a hailstorm. One made it through the bars on Plissken's window and hit him on the face. The car swerved as he fought for control. Glass broke out of the back window. Screams came from Maggie. More rocks, bigger. Fire came at the car. A torch flew up to hit the windshield, then rolled onto the hood. Plissken jerked some more, knocking it off.

The street in front of them was filled with people shaking rocks and clubs, black people with painted faces, wailing softly, not speaking. Plissken grabbed the pistol from his holster.

"Here," he said, handing it over to Hellman.

He was slowing into the crowd. The rocks stopped coming.

Brain Hellman just stared at the weapon in his hands, lips working.

"You got the wrong man for the job," Maggie said.

Plissken grabbed the gun away from Hellman and handed it back to

her. “Here we go,” he said.

He plowed into the mob, moving through it. They were all over the car, grabbing, hanging on, pressing blank silent faces through the window slats. They were banging, banging, hands and clubs. They were squirming up the hood, the roof, dancing on the roof, rocking the car, tearing it up.

Plissken couldn’t see out of the windshield. Grabbing up the rifle, he aimed it out the front. He fired quickly, blasting off the lip-snarling head of a wildly painted man who lay on the windshield. The body jumped and rolled off the car. More people scrambled on the hood. Plissken squeezed them off, blasting spider web holes through the windshield. Exploding bullets flared the night clearing bodies off the car.

Maggie yelled from behind. One of them had jumped on the back of the wagon, reaching for her through the shattered back window. Bringing up the automatic, she fired point blank, and the explosion hurled the man back to the street.

They were getting through the mob, clearing it.

“Not bad, baby,” Plissken called back to her.

“Nothing to it,” she returned.

“Snake!” Hellman yelled, pointing back out the bullet-cracked windshield. Plissken turned. The headlight was catching something, something massive just ahead. They closed on it. A barricade, five feet high, blocked the entire street ahead. A congealed mass of cars, mailboxes, telephone booths and street lights. Plissken slammed on the brakes, gauging the thing.

“They’re coming!” Maggie called from the back seat, and he didn’t have to look to appreciate her words. There was only one way to go—over the top, just like in the army.

“Hold on!” he yelled and hit the gas.

He had thoughts of smashing through the mess, but it was too strong. They slammed the wall, full speed; the car cried with rending metal on the tooth-jarring impact. Plissken was back full in the seat, bracing the wheel stiff-armed. And they were airborne, their speed careening them over the wall.

The flying sensation lasted only a second, then they came down, they came down hard, crashing, metal shrieking, sparks flying, and Plissken thinking his spine would pop out the top of his head.

Then there was quiet.

They looked at each other. Plissken shrugged and turned off the key, then on. The engine complained, but started back up. He

shrugged again, and eased the thing into gear. It moved, shaking and crying the whole time, but it did move.

“Son of a bitch,” Hellman said.

Plissken seconded that motion.

XVII

GRAND CENTRAL STATION
15:53:39, :38, :37 . . .

The Station had been old for a long time. It had started being old when Mister Ford invented his assembly line and aircraft began to get large and quietly menacing. Then there were wars, terrible wars, and it got even older. It was a large, airy place, delicately toned, reflecting the simple-minded philosophies of the nineteenth-century technocrats. The Station became old as soon as technology became a dark and twisted thing, a thing to fear, a controller.

And now it was very old, indeed.

The car wasn't doing too well. It was terminally ill, dying quickly of a compound fracture of the oil pan. It wobbled badly down the dirt road that led up to the rear of Grand Central Station. Gray-black smoke oozed thickly out from underneath.

The gullied road was choked with high weeds. It ran beside the tracks that had once moved people and commerce down its veins and arteries, pumping the lifeblood of the city to the whole nation. Now the city was dead, its veins deteriorated and collapsed.

"He's down there," Hellman said, pointing to a burned-out train farther along the track.

Small campfires dotted the area around the outside of the Station, around the platforms. Light also flickered from within the still distant, crumbling testament to a world that no longer existed. Figures moved around the fires, silhouettes going about the business of survival. Plissken kept watching, looking for trouble.

Hellman was still pointing. "He's in the third car, by the campfire."

The train was just ahead. It was a hulking ruin, tons of dead metal, useless. Plissken eased up on it slowly and carefully. He heard sounds, and turned his head.

Engines, thundering engines. They watched past the weeds, past the out buildings, to the streets beyond. In the distance, the Duke's caravan rumbled toward the Station, homeward.

"It's all right," Hellman said, but his voice didn't sound like it was

all right "Duke's gotta go the front way. He'll never beat us."

Plissken grunted and looked at the man. "When you get in there," he said, "talk fast, understand?"

The dirt road terminated in the crumbling platform. They bumped up on the cracked cement and sputtered toward the distant fire.

"What if they recognize the car?" Maggie asked, as they closed on the dark figures who huddled around the fire.

"Then I guess we're all out of luck." The Snake smiled and shoved his rifle into Hellman's ribs. "Isn't that right, Harold?"

Hellman just frowned at him. "Stop here," he said.

Plissken had to floor the brakes with both feet to get the thing to stop, but stop it did, about twenty paces from the fire. The train loomed silently beside them like the carcass of some monstrous prehistoric beast.

"You know what to do," Plissken said softly, and slid down in the seat. Hellman just sat there, staring out the bullet-pocked windshield.

"Let's get it over with," Maggie said from the back seat and opened her door.

It got Hellman to moving. He opened his door, and they both got out of the car. The Snake slid up in the seat enough to peek out the windshield. Seven men stood staring at them around the campfire. This was the part he hated, trusting Hellman.

Sliding across the seat, he quietly opened the door and eased out of the car on the train side. He rolled along the ground using the car as a shield, and finally off the platform, next to the train.

He rolled under the thing, then began climbing a boxcar to get up above them. He moved quickly, the speed still controlling his tempo.

Getting to the top of the car, he crept along its length, toward the one that held the President. He made the first one, then bridged the gap to the second as quietly as he could. Below him, Hellman had made it to the campfire.

"Hey," the man said, smiling broadly. "How's it goin'? How are you boys tonight?"

A small one with chunky, compact features and a red and yellow polka-dotted bandanna seemed to be in charge. He stepped out of the group around the fire.

"What do you want. Brain?" he asked, and his tones were edged with suspicion.

Hellman hesitated, his eyes drifting up to Plissken's form on top of the car. The Snake held up his rifle, so that the man could see its

shadow in the darkness.

"Well, ah . . ." he took a breath. "We're going inside to meet the Duke," he said finally. "He's on his way."

The man stepped closer. "He never said nothin' to us about it."

Plissken started moving again, past the figures to the next car.

"You know the Duke," Hellman said. "He don't talk much anyway. Sometimes you gotta guess what he's thinking."

Plissken slipped between the cars, going in the door of the rusting passenger car that held the President. He slipped in quietly, moving through the long shadows.

The President was in there, about halfway along in a seat. He was dirty, his clothes ripped and shredded. His face was waxen, drained of blood. A lantern lit him to yellow pallor. A cloth was wrapped around his hand, around where a finger should have been, but wasn't. He was facing Plissken's direction.

Beside him, facing away, was a Gypsy with a hacksaw, trying to cut through the titanium chains of the cuffs that held the briefcase to the President's wrist. Another one, red bearded and scarred, was down close to Plissken, watching out the glassless window at the exchange going on by the campfire.

And through it all, the only thing he could think about was Hellman. Hellman dead. Hellman with a railroad spike driven to the hilt between his eyes. Hellman on fire. Hellman without a head . . .

They banged on him, but he was removed from the pain. He had maxed out on pain, O.D.'d on it; and like too much of any drug, it left him numb and sedentary. Through the haze, he saw his own rifle leveled at his head, and he laughed to think that Hauk would be deprived of the pleasure of blowing up his insides. He figured that the bombs would go off anyway, doing their duty, desecrating the remains of already lifeless meat.

Hands were grabbing at his holster, pulling it off him.

"Hold it!"

A voice, strong with authority.

Figures moved away from the Snake. The black man with the fedora strode over to him, stopping only long enough to give Hellman a sidelong glance.

"Kill him quick," Hellman whispered. "He's slippery."

The man ignored him and walked on. Plissken opened his eye wide to stare his hatred to the man. A feeling they could share.

There was a sound, a creak. The Duke turned to it. The President

was trying to slip away between the cars.

“Don’t move, craphead,” the Duke said, then immediately turned his attention back to the Snake.

They stared at one another.

“Who are you?” the big man asked.

The Snake ignored him. If he was going to die, he would do it as he lived. In total defiance.

The Duke pursed his lips and put his hand on the arrow in Plissken’s leg. He pushed it in farther. The fire again shot through Plissken’s brain, threatening to short circuit him into unconsciousness.

“He’s Snake Plissken,” Hellman said. “From the outside. He had a gun, Duke. There was nothing I could do.”

Plissken turned for one more look at Hellman. Maggie stood behind him. She was slipping him something that he tucked under his coat.

The Duke released the arrow and stood up full, running fingertips lightly across the scars that gouged his face like planting furrows. “Snake Plissken,” he said from faraway. “I’ve heard of you.”

He walked up to straddle Plissken’s form. A tire tool was in his hand. He smiled through crooked teeth, and the Snake watched the metal bar coming toward him in slow motion. It came down on his head, but he never felt it. He just drifted away into the black, gas jumping night.

The last thing he heard before the dark mist came to wrap him up in taffy-like dreams, was the Duke’s voice echoing from another world somewhere.

“I heard you were dead.”

XVIII

THE WALL

5:45 A.M.

Bob Hauk stood at attention atop the great wall, looking toward the mammoth towers of the World Trade Center across the bay. His hands held a deathgrip on the binoculars that were strapped around his neck.

The morning was coming up bright orange and purple, the polluted atmosphere refracting the early sunlight in beautifully vibrant rainbow colors that strung out across the width of the city in never-ending, shimmering streamers.

But Hauk wasn't watching the sky. He was looking toward a tiny black dot overhanging the edge of the tall building. It may have been a glider. Then again, it may have been a shadow.

"Plissken," he whistled low, wishing an answering tone would come floating back to him like a responsive echo. "Plissken."

It had been over six hours since the man's last radio contact. Plissken could have been dead. In six hours he could be dead and stiff with rigor mortis, and Hauk would be worrying about nothing. He could have just cracked under the strain and taken the glider and tried to put distance between himself and the prison, hoping that, somehow, distance would burn out the killers in his chest.

Bob Hauk didn't believe either one of those scenarios, though. He knew Plissken, knew his kind of man. That's why he picked him for the job. He knew that the Snake was out there somewhere, alive and fighting, and he wished more than anything in the world that he could get in there and give him a hand. Time was running short.

"Plissken."

The air was crisp, fall air. It wafted gently, slowly dragging the morning light in with it. Maggie liked the morning. It made her feel that things were possible, new beginnings. There had never been anything in her life to make her feel that new starts were possible, but she was alive. Life was hope. She breathed deep, taking in a lungful of

the morning air. It was laced with the aroma of roast dog.

It was a gray morning, just like all mornings. The Duke hadn't let her and Brain leave after he got Plissken. He was thinking about them, thinking about whether or not to kill them. Brain was worried about it, but she wasn't. The Duke needed gas, and Brain was the only one who knew how to get it to him. The Duke was running things because he was jungle smart; he knew what he needed to survive. No. He wouldn't be getting rid of Brain.

The Gypsy men stared at her, let their eyes rove up and down her at will. Some of them had been sterilized, some hadn't. She could always tell it in their eyes. The normal ones wanted her, wanted her down on the concrete or bent over a car fender. That, she could understand and deal with. The others, the neuters, they wanted her dead. They wanted to kill every reminder of their life before and the things they could never have again. They wanted to mutilate her; it was all right there in their faces.

She kept a long pin way back in her free-flowing hair. Its sole purpose was to go for the eyes of the animals with blood on their minds.

She stayed close to Brain, close so that everyone would know who she belonged to. Brain, in his usual fashion, was staying close to the Duke. The platforms spread out around them, the myriad campfires of the Gypsy horde slowly dying after the morning meal.

There was excitement in the camp today, more than the usual. It was food day in Central Park, the end of the month drop. It was also the day that they made their final arrangements about the President.

Duke and Brain had moved to the station wagon that had brought them last night In the daylight, the car was a mess. It looked like it had sat there undriven for years. It was badly battered, scraped and smeared with blood.

The Duke was tying the President to the fender of the thing, propping his briefcase up on the hood, chain extended. He carried Plissken's rifle. Maggie stood at a short distance, watching them.

She had thought that Brain had made a bad mistake when he turned Snake over to the Duke. There was something about the man that made her trust him. He was too desperate, too determined, to be anything but what he said he was.

But Brain didn't think about that. He was too scared of the Duke to even think straight about anything. His cowardice had messed him up more than once.

He couldn't help it; she knew that. There were a lot of things about Brain that bothered her, that she would change if she were able, but

he was all she had and she was going to hang onto him. He provided some sort of stability to her life, and Maggie realized that stability was the only thing keeping her sane.

Brain and the Duke were walking back toward her from the car. They were talking.

“I don’t care,” the Duke was saying. “I want that diagram, Brain.”

“But Plissken said something about a time limit.”

They came up to stand beside her. Brain reached out and squeezed her arm reassuringly. She hugged him quickly, and under his coat she felt the jutting metal of the pistol she had given him.

“What time limit?” the Duke asked. He raised the rifle to his face, sighting down the barrel at the President.

“On him,” Brain answered, pointing.

The Duke fired, and the bullet exploded on the fender, near the President’s head. The man was shaking, mouth open.

“Hold still, damnit!” the Duke yelled at him, and aimed again. “That’s a lot of crap,” he told Brain. “He’s the President, for God’s sake.” He fired again. This one exploded on the hood, near the briefcase. “Aren’t you the President?” he yelled.

The man began nodding vigorously.

“He’s the most important man outside of me,” the Duke said, and drew his lips tight. “Right?” he yelled.

“Right!” the President yelled back, voice cracking.

“What did I teach you?”

The man’s lips moved for several seconds before the words came out. “You’re the Duke of New York,” he said. “You’re A-number-one.”

The Duke smiled slightly. “Can’t hear you!”

The President screamed, a piercing, shrill cry. “YOU’RE THE DUKE OF NEW YORK! YOU’RE A-NUMBER-ONE!”

The Duke looked at Brain. “Get me the diagram,” he said softly.

Brain turned to Maggie. She nodded, reassuring. She had spent the whole night selling Snake Plissken to him. Go on, she mouthed silently.

“Don’t kill Plissken, Duke,” Brain said. “We need him.”

“That’s not what you said last right.”

He looked at Maggie again. She nodded once more, proud that her man was standing up to the Duke the way he was.

“That was last night,” Brain responded.

The Duke frowned and turned the rifle on Brain. “Get moving,” he

said, and left no doubts that he meant exactly that.

Brain gulped, backing slowly away. The Duke flared back around and fired again at the President. The bullet exploded on the briefcase lock, blowing the mechanism open. Books and papers began spilling all over the ground.

Grinning wide, the Duke strode to the car, his men already running up to it.

“Let’s go,” Brain whispered to Maggie.

“Wait,” she returned. “Just a second.”

She was watching, wanting to see what the briefcase contained. It wasn’t too late to work out something else if the feeling was right. That damned Plissken. There was no reason for him to come into the city alone unless the motivation was strong. Overpowering.

The Gypsies sifted gleefully through the briefcase. They untied the President and let him away. Maggie watched carefully. Romero was there, bending down. He picked up something off the ground, a cassette of some kind. He slipped it quickly into his pocket. Nobody saw it but her.

“I’m ready,” she told Brain. “Let’s get out of here.”

XIX

CENTRAL PARK

3:30 P.M.

The Secretary had been on Hauk's case all morning. Things were not looking good and he was making doubly sure that every bit of the blame rested squarely on the Commissioner's shoulders. It was the basis of all politics: cover your own ass.

Hauk smiled a little at that, because he didn't care one way or the other anymore who got the blame for anything. And besides, the really funny part about it was the fact that Prather's people in Washington would blame the Secretary anyway—he was the federal official on the scene, and naturally responsible.

The copter blades beat their relentless rhythm above his head, and the murky daylight burned starlike glare patterns on the machine's bubble. They were coming up on Central Park. Food Drop.

Hauk hadn't been on Food Drop for a long time. He used to come every two weeks to search the crowds for Jerry, but he had given all that up.

Now he was coming again, searching again—this time for someone else. Someone for whom he felt an unbreakable bond of kinship and understanding. Someone who had promised to kill him at the first opportunity.

The Park stretched out before him, cold dead ground and naked trees. Thousands of inmates were jammed, a clamoring throng, all around the outer edges of the Park; but none, by ritual and mutual consent, were coming in. They were cheering; they were cheering the food.

They got above the Park and the two other choppers closed ranks to descend. Only two of the machines held food. Hauk's held another kind of surprise. Blackbelly pie—just in case. They came down slowly.

Hauk's pilot was pointing out the window. "Check it out," he said.

The Commissioner strained his eyes through the window glare. Below them, on the ground, was a large white X. It was surrounded by a cordon of inmates. Gypsies. The Duke's people.

“Take her down!” Hauk yelled to the pilot above the motor noise, and they broke from the other copters and floated toward the spot.

He took the microphone from the controls and flipped it to P.A. so he could speak to the squad in back. “We’re going down,” he said. “Something’s happening. Be ready, but no shooting unless I give the word. Understand that. I will kill the first man who uses a weapon without authorization.”

He stuck the mike back on its cradle. There would be no repeats of the scene at the fallen plane.

They were coming down on the X. Bullseye. The Gypsies started backing away, moving for the trees. He glanced over at the other copters in the distance. They hovered just above the ground, mammoth, covered crates disgorging from their underbellies. This was the first drop of the day. There would be many others. Tremendous masses of people were converging on the food, charging across the barren ground, waving their arms. The copters lifted off and their bundles completely disappeared under the sheer crush of numbers.

Hauk’s chopper settled to the ground; the Gypies were gone, all vanished. His men were out of the machine immediately, encircling the copter for protection.

Something was laying on the ground in the clearing. Hauk watched from the copilot’s seat as one of his men ran over to pick it up. He ran back toward the Commissioner, holding it high in the air.

It was a briefcase. It was *the* briefcase.

The sound of the oil rig used to drive Maggie crazy, its continual thump-da-thump sound going too fast, driving the human body to move faster than it normally would.

But Brain had taught her to disassociate herself from it, and now she never even noticed that it made any sound at all.

Brain was thinking, trying to think, and Maggie was prodding him as gently, yet firmly, as she could. Moving him along the proper channels.

“He has to have an angle, Brain,” she said. “You’ve told me how bad he hates the Man. He wouldn’t just go to work for him like that”

Brain had his back to her, studying the map. “I just can’t figure it, you know? Just can’t get it straight in my head.”

She was holding Plissken’s pistol, turning it around in her hands. It was cold and gray, standard army issue. She pulled out the clip and looked it over, trying to figure out how many shots were left. She shoved it back in the gun. “It’s all too crazy to be a lie,” she said. “I

believe him."

"God," Brain answered, his fingers traveling over the mapface. "What if he *is* telling the truth?" He turned to shake his bearded head at her. "I really hate that guy."

He looked at her for a long second, and she could tell that he was finally, really, working it all out. "There are only a few places he could land a glider," he said, his eyes getting distant the way they did when he was thinking. "Top of the Port Authority." He shook his head. "Too low to the ground." He stroked his furry beard. "In the Park?"

He turned back to the map, his finger hurrying across its face. He stopped down south, down by the bay. He stabbed the map viciously with his finger. "Top of the World Trade Center," he said. "Bingo! That's got to be it"

Maggie smiled at him. Sometimes she thought that she was almost in love with Brain Hellman. "So, now what?" she asked.

Hauk walked into the control bunker and threw the briefcase on a table. Rehme turned white. Prather began to get excited. Hauk could see by the man's face that he was already thinking of ways that he could get credit for the recovery. Prather should have looked more closely at the Commissioner's face.

Neither of them touched the briefcase. Neither could bear that particular strain. Bob Hauk frowned; he had to do it all himself.

Not a word had been spoken. There were no words. Hauk sighed deeply and reached into the satchel. Extracting a piece of paper, he sat himself on the edge of the table and read it aloud: "Amnesty for all prisoners in New York City in exchange for President. Fifty Ninth Street Bridge. Tomorrow. Twelve noon. No bullshit or he's dead."

"Where's the tape?" Prather asked, getting down to the heart of the matter.

Hauk fixed him with cold eyes. "It's not here."

"Well, then . . ."

"There's more," Hauk said. Reaching into the case, he pulled out a pair of infrared goggles and threw them on the table. Each lens had a nail stuck through it. Hauk felt as if *he* were wearing those goggles.

"They're Plissken's," Rehme said softly.

Prather immediately pulled into his hard politician's shell. His voice got domineering and hateful. "So much for your man, Hauk."

Hauk wanted to grab him, wanted to go right across the table and

rip his razored tongue right out of his mealy mouth. No one would blame him if he did, either. But he didn't. That would have made him too much like the other uniformed maniacs. Instead, he said: "Warm up the choppers. We're going in."

He watched Rehme bolt out the door. He watched the entire bunker spring to life with merely a word. He felt strange inside. Dead.

XX

CAVALCADE OF SPORTS
EARLY EVENING

Plissken saw himself at the bottom of a deep, dry well—darkness all around, a pinpoint of light far overhead. A voice seemed to be calling to him down the hole, beckoning him to climb.

He reached out his arms and felt the walls on either side of him. They were slick, oozing slime. It seemed a lot easier and more comfortable to just stay where he was.

The voice called to him again. Curious, he decided to check it out. The bucket rope was hanging down, dangling in the middle of the hole. He felt for it, found it with his hands. Taking a deep breath, he jumped as high as he could and grabbed hold, using his feet to help him on the side walls.

It was a hell of a climb, and more than once he wanted to just chuck it away and go back down to rest, but the voice was getting louder, more insistent.

He pulled and strained and finally made it to the top. The light was bright, blinding. It hurt his good eye and made his bad eye throb uncontrollably, setting his head on fire.

He focused. An ugly face with a crooked nose and breath that smelled of kerosene filled all of his vision. The face was smiling obscenely.

“Let’s go, Snake,” it said.

He shook his head and looked around. He was lying on a table in a large, wrecked dining room. The place had been gingerbread house ornate at one time, but the gingerbread of ancient times had gotten stale and crumbled away.

Gypsies surrounded him. They were all grinning widely, nodding their shaggy, moustached faces.

Plissken tried to sit up, but the pain in his head nearly blacked him out again. Shutting his eye tight, he opened it slowly, letting the pain seep in. He looked down at his leg. The arrow was gone, a dirty rag tightly wound took its place. His pants leg was soaked with blood. The

blood was dry. He realized that he had been there for a long time. His shirt was gone. He was cold.

"Come on," said the man who had woke him up.

They were levelling crossbows at him, fearful of him even in his condition. A tribute, he supposed. Somebody poked him with an ax handle. He was kitten weak, barely able to hold himself upright. Putting up his hands, he feebly tried to ward them off. It was then that he noticed that the countdown clock was gone from his wrist.

"Get up!" the man said.

They pulled him to his feet, but it was like walking in a dream, a hazy, pain-filled dream. Besides the concussion that he must have surely had, he had probably lost enough blood to qualify him for an economy rate at the donor bank. They pushed him toward the door.

Plissken wobbled through the door. His leg hurt, but he could put some weight on it if he just concentrated on the incredible pain in his head. Small consolation.

They were in a long, dark hallway. It was a wreck, totally junked and of the same style as the dining room. He heard a rumbling sound in the distance, but couldn't quite make it out.

A hand shoved him roughly along.

He started to turn, to breathe fire at them. But he saw something that made the words burn in his own throat. Something was coming from the other direction. It was two Gypsies bearing a stretcher.

As it went past, he glanced down at it. They were carrying a man, in pieces. It looked like he had been literally torn apart. The sound came up again. It was cheering.

Dying light filtered in tiny shafts through some high ceiling transoms, but he couldn't tell how late it was. "How about the time?" he mumbled to his captors.

They all laughed. "Time to die, Snake," one of them said.

The sounds got louder the farther they walked. Finally, they came to the end of the hall and turned a corner, walking directly into a stentorian wall of sound.

The cheering came from thousands of voices. They were in the huge lobby of Grand Central Station, with its cloud-scraping ceiling, wide open. The place was filled with chairs, and all the chairs were filled by gross human imitators yelling and stomping their feet. It wasn't just Gypsies, but every gang was represented: Africks, Low Riders, Chinkas, Dollies, Octoes, all were there.

The cheering increased in volume as more and more of them saw Plissken enter the room. It rang up to the ceiling and rained back

down. The Snake felt as if he were on the inside of a bell.

They kept pushing him along through the frenzied crowds. They reached for him as he went by, hands everywhere, but the guards kept him from falling into those hands. They had apparently planned something a lot more enjoyable.

The smell in the room was bad, all sweat and belly gas, the granddaddy of all locker rooms. He breathed through his mouth. They kept moving him toward the center of the room. There was something there, lit by torches. He got close enough to see. It was a ring, a boxing ring. He got all the way up on it. The canvas was completely covered with blood.

He was pushed through the crudely strung ropes, into the ring itself. He glanced around the sea of faces that leered up at him—not an ounce of sympathy in the whole lot. His name had apparently lost its magic. His eyes drifted upwards. The Duke sat in a special box, surrounded by his lieutenants. He had Plissken's rifle strapped on his back and he wore a big, contented smile on his face.

Noise came from behind him. Someone else was being led up to the ring, and the cheering increased in volume again. Then there was a chant, a name being called over and over.

"Slag. Slag. Slag."

The man climbed through the ropes. He was huge, the biggest man Plissken had ever seen. His muscles were toned and rigid, oiled to glistening in the torchlight. He was an ox, a machine. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him. He wore black tights and shiny knee boots.

The Snake backed away, leaning against a corner post. His eye went to the man's hand; he was wearing Plissken's watch. He squinted and turned his head sideways to read the face. It read: 4:02:15.

He looked into Slag's face. The man smiled slowly, evilly—almost as if he understood.

Hauk sat in the control bunker, the stationary eye in the middle of the swirling hurricane of activity. He watched the outside monitor screens. The choppers were warming up on the pads again. All of them. But this time there would be no holding back, no restraint. No discretion.

It was all out of control. This time the blackbellies would go in with their guns screaming, and they wouldn't stop screaming until they ran out of ammo. Once unchained, the black-suited killers wouldn't stop until they had destroyed everything they could find.

It wouldn't get the President back. It wouldn't help the Hartford

Summit. It wouldn't even find Snake Plissken. It was lust. The simple lust for death . . .

And he would be giving the order.

The microphone sat before him. He picked it up, Just as he had done so many times in the past hours. He stared at it, quiet, mocking. His lifeline of air. He flipped it on.

"Plissken," he said, low, almost a moan.

"Plissken . . ."

The rules were ample: no rules. Plissken kept darting his head around, looking for a way out, but Gypsies with long knives and bows had formed a circle around the ring, making sure he stayed put. Slag was clenching and unclenching his massive fists. Nobody needed to tell the Snake that it was a fight to the death. He figured that out.

The Duke was making a speech. Through the pain and the tension and the noise, he tried to focus on it.

". . . And they sent in their best man. And when we roll down the Fifty Ninth Street Bridge tomorrow, on our way to freedom, we're gonna have their best man leading the way . . . from the neck up, on the hood of my car!"

And the cheering went up again, and applause. The room was awash with noise, drowning in it. The Duke held up his hands for silence, and the roar died down to a growl.

"Let's do it!" the man screamed through cupped hands, and the cheering came up again.

A Gypsy climbed through the ropes carrying two baseball bats. Louisville sluggers. He gave one to Slag, then moved to Plissken, grinning wide enough to crack his face.

Plissken took the bat and watched the Gypsy get the hell out of the ring. He wished that he could enjoy such a luxury. A man wearing a grotesque Halloween mask that looked better than the real faces, stood at ringside with a hammer. As soon as the bat boy got out of the way, he struck it to a bell. The fight was underway.

The big man's face was a sag of flesh, as if his muscles simply got tired that high up and were pulled down by gravity. He rearranged the flesh into a hard frown and began stalking the Snake.

Plissken limped as far away from the man as the ring would allow. Slag came for him slowly, bludgeon raised high above his head. The Snake gave it all his concentration, and the crowd noises disappeared completely from his hearing. All that remained was Slag. They were the whole universe, and one of them had to die.

Plissken figured that *he* still had four hours left.

The big man faced off slowly, weaving back and forth, and Snake, reptile that he was, never broke eye contact. Slag lunged, his eyes giving him away a second before. The bat swung out as Plissken ducked. It whooshed over his head.

The bat arced back the other way, faster than Snake could have believed possible. He rolled in the direction of the blow, going to the sticky canvas, all pain wiped from his body in the mental rush to survive.

The big man was right on top of him. He tried to get to his feet, but the bat was there, right there! It connected hard on his shoulder, picking him off the ground and sending him flying against the ropes.

He went down hard, and the bat was there again, coming straight down. He rolled and the thing whapped the ground, shaking the whole ring.

“Are you sure he’s down here?” Brain asked nervously as they walked the dark hallway toward the storeroom.

Maggie put an arm on his back, patting—also pushing. “I heard them say so. Just relax, would you? This is the easy part.”

Maggie kept reassuring him, kept him pumped up. She was positive that this was their only way out and there was no chance that she was going to let Brain fag out on her. The muffled cheering barely reached them where they were, but it never left her hearing. It was Plissken they were yelling about. He was in there getting his head knocked off by Slag. Too bad. He would have been a tremendous help to them. Now they were going to have to do it all by themselves—if Brain would just hold together.

“I wish Snake was here,” he told her.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever beard you say that,” she responded, and smiled when he jerked his head to her. He smiled back, a nervous, frightened smile.

They came up to the storeroom door. Brain stopped and looked at it. Maggie reached out and knocked before he changed his mind.

The door opened, and Romero stuck his head out. He snarled with his pointy teeth, the skin on his skeletal face stretched tight as a drum head. He was wearing Cabbie’s hat, slightly tilted, to the side of his head.

“Where’d you get that?” Brain asked.

“Got it from Cabbie,” the man responded in a whisper voice. “Traded him.”

Brain was shifting his weight from foot to foot, pulling on the hem of his cloth jacket. “For what?” he asked.

Maggie pinched him on the back, trying to make him stand still. He was blowing the whole deal.

“What are you so nervous about?” Romero asked, his sunken eyes glaring.

“I gotta see the President,” Brain blurted out.

“Who says?”

“The Duke,” Brain said, nodding his head and looking around. He wouldn’t meet Romero’s eyes. Maggie reached a hand into her jacket and grasped the automatic.

“No, he doesn’t,” Romero answered, and his voice had gotten rough like sandpaper.

“I’ll tell him you said that,” Brain said with contrived self-righteousness. “Come on,” he snapped at Maggie and turned on his heel.

“Wait a minute,” Romero called after him.

Brain stopped, his back still to the man. Maggie looked up at him. He wiggled his eyebrows. She smiled, proud.

“Why?” Romero asked.

They turned back around. “He’s got something in his collar,” Brain said. “In the lining. The Duke wants it” They walked back to the man.

“What?” Romero asked, still blocking the doorway.

Brain shrugged. “Cyanide capsules,” he replied. “The Duke don’t want a dead President. Plissken told him about them.”

Reluctantly, eyes still wary, Romero opened the door. Maggie gave Brain a good shove and both of them were in right away. There were three other guards lounging around. The President sat like a lifeless mannequin in the corner.

“Cyanide?” Romero said, his voice climbing a hill.

Brain moved toward the President, taking a knife out of his jacket. Maggie moved away from the center of the room, hand still on the pistol, tightening.

“Might try to take it tomorrow,” Brain said.

The Gypsy put his hands on his hips. “Why would he do that?”

Brain got to the President and began messing with his collar. The man looked up at him, coming up out of a deep stupor. His eyes got wide when he saw the knife.

Maggie watched Romero, watched it all snap together in his mind.

She eased the gun slowly out of her belt. Romero moved toward Brain.

“That’s just so much bull,” he said, putting a hand on Brain’s shoulder. “You’re not supposed to be in here, Brain . . .”

Brain flashed around with the knife, burying it to the hilt in Romero’s stomach. The man’s expression never changed. His face, already a deathshead, simply made that abstraction real. He sank slowly to the floor.

Maggie had the gun out and was firing before she even realized it. The room was small, the targets big. She blasted two of the guards down before they could even stand. The third got right up on her before the gun coughed again and took off his head.

She looked at Brain.

She smiled.

XXI

ROUND TWO

3:58:53, :52, :51 . . .

Plissken never heard the bell, he was too busy rolling around on the bloody canvas, trying to stay alive. But Slag heard it, a recurring what-round-is-this nightmare.

The big man stopped immediately, like a trained seal, dropping his bat to the ground. He stomped over to his corner like a good little boy.

The Snake staggered to his feet, getting to the first vacant corner he saw. His body was one big welt. He was probably black and blue all over, but he couldn't see beneath the blood that covered him from his tussle with the wet canvas.

Rolling his head around on his shoulders, he let his eye rove the crowd again. They were all yelling and sweating, getting warmed up, wagering for cans of tomato soup. Then he caught something, a glint.

A Gypsy with a red bandanna stood by the round ringer. He wore a medallion on a chain around his neck. Plissken blinked. The medallion looked familiar. It was the tracer that Hauk had given him.

The referee came back into the ring and collected the bats. He handed them to the red bandanna and got some others in their place. He went to them in turn, issuing one each: trash can lid and bat. These were bats plus. A long nail was jutting out of the end of each.

The crowd was on its feet, jumping with the lust and the excitement. Plissken put them out of his mind.

The radio was obstinate; it just wouldn't answer. Hauk tightened the straps on his backpack and wished he was off asleep somewhere, curled up like a big dog in a sun spot.

But he wasn't.

From habit he pulled the pearl-handled revolver out of its bed and snapped open the cylinder, checking the ammo. He flicked it closed just as Rehme came into the bunker.

"They're ready," the man said.

"Sure."

"Is it go?"

Hauk looked at that damnable radio. It stared silently back at him. "Yeah," he said finally, and let Rehme lead him out of the room.

Plissken heard the bell this time, listened closely to it since it could be the last one he'd ever hear.

He limped into the center of the ring and waited for the man-mountain. He didn't have to wait long. Slag lumbered out, looking like some sort of crazed Roman gladiator.

The man smelled victory and came right for Plissken, no feints or parries. He growled loudly and came straight down with the bat.

The Snake got up his shield, but the force of the blow buckled him almost to the ground. His reflexes were going; he just couldn't hold together much longer.

The bat came down again, hammering Plissken, driving him to his knees. If he was going to live to have his arteries blown up, he'd have to do something soon.

The bat was up, straining, coming down for the final blow. Plissken had one shot. Slag's legs were unprotected. He swung out hard and low from his vantage point on the floor.

He didn't have much strength left but what he did have went into the swing. He caught Slag on the shin, the nail sinking deeply into the man's leg right through his boot.

Slag howled, bending to grab his leg. Plissken jumped up, jerking his bat out, a good hunk of Slag meat coming with it. The big man's arms reached futilely for him through his pain, but the Snake slithered underneath his grasp.

He came up behind. This was it. Before the big man could turn on him, he levered the bat as far behind him as he could and came straight back over his head with it.

The blow caught Slag on the back of the neck, on the spine, and the nail sunk in all the way up to the Hank Aaron autograph on the varnished wood.

Plissken backed away; the bat stayed for supper. Slag couldn't move. He was paralyzed from the blow. All he could do was stand there, gurgling cries seeping from his open mouth. His body, stiff, began weaving around like a top near the end of its spin. Then he simply fell over, stiff as a starched collar.

Plissken moved around him, exhaustion overpowering him. Once

the fight was over, his will began to drain quickly away.

The crowd was still cheering, but this time they were cheering for him. King of the jungle. He fell against the ropes and tried to climb through, but someone rushed up to keep him in.

He saw the man through a bloody fog, focused on his warning color. Red. Red bandanna. He remembered something. Yes. The man wore his tracer around his neck.

Letting himself fall between the ropes, he made the red bandanna catch him to put him back. When the man grabbed him, he reached out and twisted the safety catch on the tracer, then pushed the button. It was all he had the strength to do.

The choppers were churning, grinding the air. Ready. Hauk put on the headset and prepared to give the order. Prather stood just outside the pads, watching intently. More than anything, Hauk wanted to go get the man and force him into the city with them, force him to live, just for awhile, the hell that formed the substance of all their lives.

He was just turning to give the order when he saw Rehme. He almost ignored it, but the man was running, charging. He was waving his arms wildly above his head.

Hauk hesiated for a second, then pulled off the headset. Rehme passed Prather and kept on coming toward Hauk's copter. He got there, breathing hard, and began banging frantically on the door.

The Commissioner popped it open and leaned out.

"What?" he yelled.

Rehme couldn't get his breath, kept gulping air. The words were getting lost in his throat.

"What is it?"

"Plissken . . ." the man said through gasps.

"What about . . ."

"Plissken's tracer."

Hauk jerked around to his pilot and grabbed him by the front of his uniform. "You get on that horn," he ordered. "Keep 'em down. Nobody moves. *Nobody* moves!" Reaching out, he tore off the man's goggles, getting eye to eye with him. "Do you understand?" he said.

The man nodded, gulping.

Hauk let him go and climbed out of the copter, leaving his backpack behind him on the seat. He couldn't feel his body as he ran. His concentration was all centered. He was moving eyes, moving toward the bunker.

Plissken stared at Slag's motionless form on the canvas. He couldn't tell whether the man was living or dead. He was just laying there, eyes staring abstractly at the high ceiling. The crowd was chanting again, but the words were different this time:

"Snake, Snake, Snake!"

He staggered over to the big man, and fell to his knees beside his prostrate form. The countdown watch was still hooked on his unmoving wrist.

"Excuse me," Plissken said, and unstrapped the thing from Slag's arm. He looked at it before he put it on, 3:39:22.

He put it on and slowly, painfully, creaked back up to stand on his feet. He raised his arms straight up, fists clenched in the victory salute. He looked defiantly up at the Duke's box. The man wasn't even watching him. He was listening intently to one of his men, and from the look on the Duke's face, he wasn't getting very good news.

Plissken kept his eye on them, even as he acknowledged the crowd. Something was up. Something big.

When the man finished talking, the Duke jumped up and ran from his box, all of his people hurrying behind. The man who had delivered the message stayed behind in the box. He began waving his arms for silence.

It took a while for everyone to see him, but they finally did. The noise in the room died down to nothing. Plissken couldn't believe the change. Absolute silence ruled the mammoth room. The crowd got quietly to its feet, listening.

The man spoke loud enough so that his words were driven home on the crowd the way that Plissken had driven home the baseball bat. "The President's gone!" he yelled. "Brain took him!"

It was like a fire in a madhouse. The whole place went immediately berserk; people were screaming, running in all directions, chairs overturned and flew through the air. These people had had one chance at freedom and it was suddenly snatched away from them.

They weren't taking it well.

Plissken no longer mattered. Plissken was nothing. Brain was everything. Brain was all that mattered. They wanted Brain. Climbing through the ropes, the Snake limped away with the crowd. He wanted Brain, too. And he figured he knew where he could find him.

EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

The tracer let out a steady piercing whine. It was at once the most grating and beautiful sound that Hauk had ever heard in his lifetime.

He watched, impatient, as Rehme tried to triangulate the signal on the radar screen in the control bunker. The man kept fiddling with the dials, muttering to himself.

“Hurry up,” Hauk said, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

The Secretary had wandered in after them and stood off to the side, straightening his tie, waiting to see which way it was going to roll before he committed himself.

“There,” Rehme said, pointing. A faint dot had appeared on the radar scan. “Grand Central Station.”

Hauk banged a fist happily down on the table top. “I knew that son of a bitch was alive!”

All at once, the transmit signal started faltering, breaking up. Then it died, choked off.

“It’s gone,” the Secretary said, and he sounded almost happy.

“The signal only lasts fifteen minutes,” Hauk told him, then turned to stare at Rehme. “Down load the choppers. We’re in a stand-by situation.”

Rehme gave him the thumbs up, and slapped him on the back as he hurried out the door.

“Is that wise?” Prather asked, walking up close to Hauk. “Anybody could have pushed that button.”

Hauk found a chair and sat heavily. “Only Plissken knew there was a safety catch,” he returned, leaning his head back. He would have closed his eyes, but he was afraid that they’d stay closed. He sat up straight, shaking his head. “Well give him a little more time, just to make sure.”

Plissken found his leather jacket back in the dining room. He slipped it on, though the pain in his upper body made it a laborious process. Finding an exit, he limped out into the already darkening sky. He had missed the whole day.

The streets were crazy. People and cars, moving, hurrying; they were directionless, scattered, mindlessly charging around. It was a futile search, a doomed mission. Plissken smiled. He knew exactly how they felt.

He zipped his jacket halfway and turned up the collar. “You’re not going to do it to me again, Harold. No way.”

He moved casually along the sidewalk. He came upon a tiny car painted rust red. A Gypsy was just opening the door to get in. Plissken

jumped at the man. Grabbing him by his long hair, he jerked him away from the car and flung him to the ground.

"There'll be a bus along in a few minutes," he told the man. Jumping into the car, he crossed the starter wires and roared away immediately. He had a date with a glider.

Hauk sat in his chair and watched the Secretary of State pace the room like he was on guard duty. The man was angry, finally cracking. Good.

"You blew it, Hauk," Prather said. "We've got to go in. Now!"

Hauk smiled up at him. "A little late to be taking charge now, isn't it, Mister Secretary?"

The man tried to stare him down, but Hauk was in a class by himself when it came to staring contests. "Go in now, Hauk!" the man screamed.

Hauk stood and stretched. "We hold," he said.

The man got right up in his face. "You're countermanding my orders!"

Hauk jabbed him with an index finger, pushing him back. "This is my prison," he said calmly. *"I* give the orders."

"I override all that."

Hauk put his hands on his hips, his right, by design, resting on his gun butt. "Just try," he said.

"You sent for me?" came a voice from the doorway. They both turned to watch Dr. Cronenberg come ambling into the bunker, hands stuffed down in the pockets of his lab coat.

Hauk pushed past Prather. "Where's your machine?" he asked.

"At the airstrip," the old man said, smiling just a touch at the confrontation he had just witnessed, but smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it

"How long would it take to get it back over here?"

Cronenberg moved all the way into the room, nodding hello at the Secretary. "Twenty minutes, give or take," he said. "But he'll use the glider, won't he?"

"If he can," Hauk answered.

Hauk walked over to the instrument panel and picked up a mobile two-way. He handed it to Cronenberg. "Stay on this radio," he said. "Talk to me when you get there."

The doctor stuck the black box into a coat pocket. He looked at

Hauk and smiled curiously. “Somehow, I think you’ve grown fond of Mister Plissken.”

“I love him,” Hauk grimaced. “When I see him, I’m gonna give him a big, wet kiss on the lips.”

XXII

FUN WITH GLIDERS

2:05:34, :33, :32 . . .

The car died about a block from the World Trade Center. Plissken jumped out and hobbled the rest of the way on foot. He was in bad shape, but he kept moving, not dwelling on it, letting his simple momentum carry him forward.

He hurried across the broken streets and ran into the building without precautions. There was no time. He headed right for the stairs, but stopped long enough to take notice of a beat-up steam car that was sitting directly in the center of the lobby. It hadn't been there the last time he had.

The climb was awful, never-ending. It turned his bad leg into a mirror reflection of his eye, pain coursing through the electrical connections of his body with every step.

He wound up the endless stairs in total darkness, gasping for breath, sucking in chunks of fetid air, tripping over the decomposing bodies, mindless of the pervasive stench. He was beyond all that. The horror had congealed itself in his mind and had become the norm.

He would get to the top—somehow. He was rapidly losing motor control of his body and his breath came up shallowly, in short gasps. The blow on the head kept him forever dizzy.

He got through the stairwell door and into the long hallway. Trying to move down the hall, his legs wouldn't do what he wanted them to. Dark dripping walls seemed to sag inward to bounce him off them. He fell. More than once.

From the ground, he looked up that listing hallway. It seemed to be rocking like the deck of a ship in high seas. He wanted to sleep some more, just a little rest. The harpy on his arm told him to get moving. He got to his feet and started walking again, fighting to keep his balance. He fell again. Got up.

Using the wall for support, he'd push off and make It to the other wall, push off and go back. It got him to the end of that hallway. The final stairway. The easy one to the roof.

Opening the door, he skirted the one that he had kicked down from

upstairs, and started up. He moved slowly, using the bannister for support. Then he heard the gunshots.

Stopping, he took a deep breath, trying to bring the reserve up once more. It wasn't over yet. His hands felt rubbery as he wiped them across his face. His face didn't feel like anything at all.

He made the top of the stairs and looked out. Maggie, Hellman and the President were pinned down in the heliport shack. They were surrounded by Indians in full war paint. The sun had gone nearly all the way down, the only light a streak of cherry pink that formed a horizontal band across the sky.

Maggie kept them back with the pistol, using it sparingly, only when they threatened to move in. The Indians ran around the shack, yelling and throwing things.

He watched them for a second, but his attention was diverted by the glider. Several of the inmates had climbed up on the wing and were jumping up and down on it like a see-saw, tottering the machine over the edge. One of them was working on the anchor rope, hacking on it with an ax.

Plissken, without thought, came out of the doorway and started walking resolutely toward them. The maniacs wanted to dump the thing. He kept moving. The ax hacked through the rope. He started running.

"No," he called. "No!"

With a triumphant yell, they tipped the balance and the plane slid quietly off the building to begin its incredible plunge to the pavement so very far below. It had so far to fall that they wouldn't even hear the sound of its crash.

He stopped walking, everything stopped. The glider was done for. Snake Plissken was done for—almost.

The Indians surrounding the heliport all stood and watched him. He smiled and began limping toward them. He must have been a horrible sight, even to them.

They edged forward, clubs and rocks at the ready.

He shrugged at them, turning an index finger into his cheek. Then—he bolted! Right past them he ran, right through the blown-away door of the shack.

The attack resumed immediately, chunks of cement and debris bouncing through the glassless viewport window. Maggie fired while Brain screamed at them at the top of his voice, shaking his fist.

"Goddamn redskins," he yelled. "Savages!"

Maggie's eyes drifted up to Plissken's. They shared a look. She

smiled. “I believe this is yours,” she said, and handed him the pistol.

Crouching down, he took it from her. “You people ready?” he asked.

Brain looked over at him, his face composed. “Yeah,” he said.

He looked at the President. The man was flattened against a wall, tears streaming down his face.

“Mister President?” he asked.

“Yes,” the man answered, eyes closed tight. “Yes, yes. Anything.”

“Okay,” the Snake said, and jumped up.

Wheeling out the viewport, he fired three times. Three men fell. The others retreated for cover.

“Let’s go!” Plissken yelled and, grabbing the President by the arm, they ran out of the shack. Maggie was right on their heels without hesitation. Brain followed.

They got to the stairs before the Indians came for them. They hurried down and slammed closed the bottom door.

“Keep ’em out,” Plissken said, and the three put their weight against the door while he ran down the hall.

There was a battered desk lying in the hallway. Getting behind, he shoved it, screeching along the quarry stone floor. The savages were banging on the other side of the door.

“Help me,” he said. “Out of the way.”

They grabbed the desk and shoved it up against the door, bracing it on the wall on the other side. There was no way the door could be opened.

“All right,” Hellman said, breathing easily.

“Yeah, all right,” Plissken replied, and, grabbing Hellman by the throat, shoved him backward to bang into a wall. He stuck the automatic up to his forehead. “That your car in the lobby?” he asked politely.

Hellman choked around his grasp. “Uh-huh,” he managed.

“Keys!”

Hellman, his eyes like ping-pong balls, fumbled in his pants pocket and fished out the keys. As soon as they were out of the pocket, the Snake removed his stranglehold and snatched them away.

“Ah . . . Snake, listen . . .” Hellman stuttered.

Plissken thrust his hand out, unwilling to listen anymore. “The diagram of the bridge.”

“Wait a minute, Snake.”

“Damnit, Harold,” Plissken said. “You just don’t know when you’re

well off.” He tore into Hellman’s coat with his free hand, finding the diagram in an inside pocket.

“Fine,” he said. “Smooth as silk.” Stepping away from Brain Hellman, he took the bewildered President by the arm again and started leading him resolutely down the dark hall. He passed by Maggie. She stared at him silently, her face resigned to the choices that she made.

“You picked wrong,” he told her and kept moving.

Brain was right behind him, dogging him. He had Maggie by the hand. “I swear to God, Snake. I thought you were dead.”

“You and everybody else,” the Snake said over his shoulder.

“I can help you with the diagram,” Hellman persisted. “You can’t read and drive at the same time.”

“Beat it.”

They were coming near the hallway’s end. Those damnable stairs again. Brain was still there, whining like a baby.

“You gotta take us with you.”

“Shouldn’t have double-crossed me again, Brain ” he said, and somewhere, way back in his mind, a flash of realization hit him like a dose of tear gas in the face. He held up the President’s wrist to look at the dangling handcuff. The briefcase was gone.

He stared wordlessly at Harker.

“He shot it off,” the man said meekly.

“The tape?”

Harker shook his little cue ball head. “Gone,” he simpered. “I don’t know where.”

“I do,” Maggie said quietly.

Plissken turned to stare at her. “You’re lying,” he spat.

Brain jumped right in, laying his hands on Plissken’s forearm. “No lie, Snake. No lie! Take you right to it”

Plissken jerked away from Hellman’s grasp. “You’d better be on the level this time,” was all he said, then started down the stairs.

Snake Plissken didn’t even remember the walk down. He had pushed way beyond his physical limitations and was simply moving on automatic. It seemed to him that his mind and his body had made a deal using the countdown watch on his arm. The deal was: if you let us forget about the pain, we’ll keep you moving for another hour or so. It seemed fair enough to the Snake, especially when he considered the alternatives.

When they came out in the lobby, nearly everyone else seemed to be in worse shape than him. Hellman was puffing wildly, unable to get his breath.

“Shit,” he said. “Oh shit . . .”

“Don’t talk,” Maggie said, helping him support his weight. “Breathe.”

Plissken looked at his watch. It read: 1:00:20. His body reminded his brain that there was still some time left.

“I’m tryin’,” Hellman said, but he was still gasping.

The President wasn’t tired. He understood the value of saving his bacon. “Come on,” he said. “We’re wasting time.”

Plissken was already at the car. He hurried inside and put the key in the ignition. Nothing. Not even a cough.

“It’s dead,” he told them when they came up to his window.

He got out of the car. Brain rushed to the hood and threw it open. A Gypsy with a crossbow popped out like a jack-in-the-box. The whole motor was gone out of the thing.

“Car trouble?” came a voice.

They turned to the darkness, and torches came up bright. The Duke was there, smiling at them. He was sitting on top of the steam engine that had been under the hood. Reaching down, he patted the thing, his fingers dancing obscenely on the steam release valve before coming back up to the rifle on his lap.

“Can’t trust these steam engines,” the man said. “They always let you down. Isn’t that right, Brain.”

Hellman took a step toward him, and Plissken slipped his hand onto the pistol in his pocket. Almost as if Brain sensed that, he stopped walking, midway between the rock and the hard place. “This ain’t my idea, Duke,” he said.

The Duke looked sympathetic. “I know, Brain. I understand.” He turned his attention to Plissken, shaking his head. “I saw your glider in the street. All these airplanes falling around here, it’s not safe to walk anymore.”

Climbing off the engine, the Duke stood upright and settled the rifle onto his shoulder. “This whole deal of yours is over now. Snake,” he said casually. “You and Brain just say goodbye to each other. Mister President and the lovely lady, just step out of the way.”

He squinted his eye to aim and Plissken moved. Ripping the automatic out of his pocket, he fired twice, quickly, from the hip. The bullets exploded on the engine block next to the Duke. One hit the

steam valve, a hot geyser spraying up in the Duke's face.

He screamed, dropping the rifle to cover his face. The steam billowed quickly, engulfing all the Gypsies. Maggie turned and slammed the hood down on the man beneath it. He groaned and fell, and the four of them took off running.

They were out the door, Gypsies regrouping quickly behind them. They hit the night-shrouded streets, and turned to run. Then Plissken heard the sounds, the familiar twang:

> "Got the time for . . .
>
> gettin' even . . ."

Cabbie screeched around a corner, headlights on high beam, face grinning crazily. He jerked to a quick stop right beside them. The Gypsies were out the door, the Duke's face burned and bloody from the hot steam.

They hurried into the cab, the Snake shoving Cabbie over to take the wheel himself. Hellman also got in the front. Plissken took off, tires spinning on the concrete before grabbing and pulling.

Plissken checked the rear view. Behind them, in the distance, four sets of headlights were in pursuit.

Hellman fumbled the diagram out of Plissken's pocket. Opening it up, he turned on the inside light. Leaning across Cabbie, he shoved it in Plissken's face.

> "Got the time for . . .
>
> gettin' even . . ."

"Couldn't let you down. Snake," Cabbie was saying, shaking his head. "I just had to come back. Had to come back."

"They're gaining on us," Maggie said from the back seat.

Hellman kept talking, shoving that damned paper in the Snake's face, while he tried to see over the top of the thing to drive.

"You got three mines right here. And then a few yards, and then three more . . ."

Plissken slapped his hand away, then grabbed the cassette out of the tape deck. He threw it down.

"Hey," Cabbie said. "That's valuable."

"They come in waves of three," Brain said.

Plissken looked angrily at him. "Where's the tape, Brain?"

Hellman smiled weakly. "The . . . tape. Oh, yeah."

“Where is it?”

“What tape?” Cabbie asked.

Maggie leaned forward and put a hand on Cabbie’s shoulder. “The tape that you traded Romero your hat for,” she said.

“From the briefcase,” the President called.

Cabbie’s eyes lit up, and the corners of his mouth tried to touch his earlobes. “Oh,” he said like some East Indian guru. *“That* tape.” He reached down into his stack and handed it to the Snake. “Here you go. I thought that I had gotten ripped off when I tried to . . .”

Plissken stuffed the tape into the deck and listened. A man’s voice began talking.

“The discovery that tritium creates only 1/1,000,000 of the biological damage of the Iodine 131, now makes it possible to begin thermonuclear fusion . . .”

The Snake snatched the tape back out of the machine and stuck it in his pocket. That’s all they needed—radioactivity on top of all their other problems. The President leaned forward from the back.

“I’ll take that now,” he said, holding out his hand.

Plissken looked at his watch. He had another half-hour left on Earth. “Not just yet,” he said. “Not quite.”

XXIII

THE BRIDGE

0:23:24, :23. :22 . . .

They came up on the bridge from underneath. It crossed above the East River Drive in a beehive of girders and pilings before taking on the river. They eased off the road and Plissken turned into the center of the web of girders, stopping on the other side of some big ones. He cut the lights.

“Come on,” the President said. “Come on!”

“Take it easy, Mister President,” Plissken said without looking at the man. “You in a hurry or something?”

They saw the headlights of the pursuit, then heard the roar of the engines. They were coming through the girder forest, too. The Snake waited until the lead car, the Duke’s Cadillac, got right up on them. Then he pulled on the lights and leaned heavily on the horn.

The car slammed on the brakes, and the one behind plowed right into it. The third car smashed into the second with the cry of rending metal. The fourth car fishtailed, backending a girder in a shower of sparks.

Plissken hit the gas and the gears at the same time and took off. Cat and mouse in the girders seemed like the thing to do. He decided to play some more.

He checked the rear view. The Duke’s car and the last car had manged to get themselves going again and were back chasing them. The other two were done for.

Pulling around another set of girders, Plissken did the same thing. The Duke’s car was coming, moving cautiously this time. The other car was right behind. Plissken let the Duke pass, then took off again, smashing into the front end of the other car, spinning it away into the pilings.

The Duke was not to be denied. That’s what made him Duke. He wheeled around and was behind them again, billowing dust drifting foglike in his headlights.

Plissken gave it all. Wheeling a corner, he smashed through several

barricades, showering wood and splinters back at the windshield. He was on the underpass, rolling up to the bridge.

The Duke came on him, tracing his path, and when Plissken reached the bridge above, he could see the other's headlights speeding up the ramp.

Plissken stopped and looked across the span of steel and concrete. It was partially lit by searchlights set into the wall that rose up from it on the other side. The light was stark white, bleached. The bridge was a battlefield, charted and blackened from previous escape attempts. It was littered with large concrete chunks and the burned-out shells of cars that didn't make it through the mine field. Large metal spikes were set in rows and spaced along the length of the bridge, the steelpointy teeth in the mouth of destruction. A large mound of dirt, all that remained of the first barricade, sat directly in front of them.

Plissken took a breath. He heard the sound of the Duke's engine whining up behind them. Locking his hands on the steering wheel, he gunned the motor.

"Easy!" Cabbie yelled. "My cab!"

The car moved, winding out, and they hit the barricade at full speed, flopping over the top to slam down hard on the other side. Everyone grunted with the jolt; Cabbie began moaning softly.

Plissken was off. The bridge was a nightmare of twists and turns. He went as fast as he dared, steering around the obstacles that blocked him off. It was easy at first, the mine fields being defined by the dead cars that found them the quick way. The farther along, the more difficult it became. There was a noise behind them. The Duke had jumped the barricade and was hurrying to catch up.

Hellman held the diagram out in front of him, desperately scanning its face with a moving finger.

"You gotta slow down, Snake," Cabbie kept saying. "Don't hurt my baby."

Hellman was pointing frantically at the paper. "I think there's three mines ahead . . ."

"You *think?*" Maggie said from the back seat.

Brain waved her off. "Just stay to the left, then jog right"

There was very little room anywhere. Abutments and latticed railings defined the outer edges, much of that already blown away. He skimmed the left, barely scraping the cement limits, knocking loosened bridge pieces over the edge.

Cabbie was reaching for the wheel, trying to take control of the car. "You're pushin' her too hard!" he yelled.

Plissken shoved him aside and looked quickly at his watch. He had ten and a half minutes left until his appointment with Death.

The car barricades had thinned to nothing, virgin territory. There were fewer holes in the bridge fabric, but more spikes. Hellman tried to hold back the cabbie and read the map at the same time.

“Okay,” he said quickly. “Here they come.”

The headlights reflected rows of spikes and an overturned pole coming right at them. Plissken hit the brakes and swerved around them. Cabbie was screaming.

Suddenly—a roar. The cab was lifted from behind with the force of a mine explosion. They skidded, out of control, into the side of the bridge, then bounced back, turning in circles. Finally, they shuddered to a stop. The cab was done for.

“Out of the car!” Plissken yelled, and they were piling out the doors.

“I said jog *right,”* Hellman kept saying.

Cabbie wasn’t getting out of the car. Plissken leaned in to him. The man sat there, huge grin on his face, dead in the seat. Not a mark on him. His car was all he had. When it died, he must have decided to go with it. The Snake tousled the dead man’s hair, then let him slump against the dashboard. It was the best coffin that Cabbie could ask for.

Plissken turned to look down the bridge. The Duke’s headlights were coming at them, steady, unrelenting. Plissken was running again, ignoring the agony in his leg.

“Here!” Rehme shouted. “Over here.”

Hauk and the Secretary rushed across the bunker to stand beside him. He was looking at the gridded wall map with the flashing light. Rehme was holding a headset up to his ear without putting it on. “It’s wall station nineteen,” he said. “They spotted two cars on the Fifty Ninth Street Bridge.”

Hauk looked at the map light that marked the station. “Is it Plissken?” he asked.

Rehme shrugged with his tired eyes. “Taxicab and a Cadillac,” he returned, trying to keep the catch out of his voice. “The taxi hit a mine. Four people on foot.”

Hauk looked at Prather just to read the man’s face. “Ten minutes,” the man said, and Hauk couldn’t figure exactly whether that was supposed to be good or bad.

He turned back to Rehme. “Get a jeep with a winch over there, fast.”

Running back to his previous station, he picked up the two-way and barked into it: "Cronenberg. Get over to wall station nineteen. They're coming across the bridge."

He put down the radio, and he felt his insides jump. Maybe he had something left in there after all. Without thought, he was out the door and running for the heli-pads.

They used the only resource left to them. They ran. They ran from the Duke, from his whining engine that wanted to eat them up. They ran from the City of Death.

There was a sound behind Plissken, a roar. He turned in time to see Brain Hellman flying through the air, tossed away by the unfeeling force of instantaneous combustion beneath his feet. No sound issued from him. He was a dead thing and would be left behind with the rest of the dead and dying.

Plissken stopped and turned. Hellman's body hit the ground ten feet from where he started. Maggie had been knocked down by the blast, and she was moving along the ground, crawling toward Brain's body. In the distance, he could still see what was left of the yellow cab with the grinning man inside. Leningrad. It was Leningrad all over again, and he was saving a man who nobody cared about for purposes that made no rational sense.

The President was still running. The Duke was closing in. He called to the woman. "Maggie! Keep moving!" He could see she wasn't going to. She had defined her priorities. He looked at his lifeclock—0:07:49, 48, 47.

Maggie crawled to Brain. He was lying on his back, eyes closed. He could be sleeping. The fright wasn't on his face anymore. There was peace there now, a contentment that she'd never seen before.

She embraced his inert form. "Oh, Brain," she whispered into his unhearing ear. "You weren't much, but you cared for me. I know you did." She kissed the cold, bloody mouth. "I won't leave you alone," she said.

Far off in her mind somewhere, she heard a sound. An engine sound. She glanced up. The Duke was coming, bearing down on her. She hugged Brain one more time. "I'll be there in a minute," she told him, and stood up, facing the oncoming headlights.

"Come on!" a voice called from behind her. She turned to look at the Snake, the catalyst. She could have turned and run with him; it was the thing to do. But somehow, it just didn't seem important anymore. Maybe being alive wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

She smiled, and waved to him. He nodded once, understanding instantly. The Snake knew what this was all about. He reached into his coat and pulled out the pistol, tossing it to her.

Drawing his lips tight, he turned and ran.

Maggie turned slowly back to face the Duke's car. She had belonged to him once, long ago, and he had given her away because she was less than nothing to him.

She raised the pistol, stiff-armed, and began firing, mechanically, automatically. The headlights approached her as if in a dream, getting larger, farther apart. They were all of the car she could see, all she ever saw.

She sensed her death, rather than felt it. She was looking out, then up, and huge, heavy things were grinding her body beneath them. She was looking into the black, black night. She was looking for Brain.

Plissken heard the skidding and turned. The Duke lost control after hitting Maggie and slid hard into the side of the bridge, nearly punching through it to fall to the river below. But it didn't fall.

He stopped running and watched. There was a second of stillness, then the driver's door burst open and the Duke climbed out, rifle in hand.

Turning again, Plissken started running toward the lights of the wall far ahead. Running, for once, to police protection.

A barrier formed the terminus of the bridge. Old, junked cars in piles, then a large concrete barrier right in front of the big wall, which stretched out as far as he could see in either direction. He kept digging, keeping the President in front of him at all times.

The winch jeep was already at the wall when Hauk settled down a distance behind in his copter. He jumped out, running to the wall, yelling as he ran.

"Get that line over the wall," he cried through cupped hands. "Move your ass!"

One of the blackbellies hurried to the line and tossed It up onto the wall, to one of the waiting guards at its top. They got hold of the thing, then frantically began attaching a pulley set up to the wall itself.

Hauk got up to them, breathing heavily. He had to get Plissken back. It had become vital to him in ways that he couldn't even begin to understand or analyze. "Come on," he whispered urgently. "Come on."

They got past the wall of cars, and jumped at the retaining wall, grabbing the top to scramble over. Plissken got to the top and looked back. The Duke was no more than fifty steps behind, getting through the cars.

The big wall was in touching distance of the one they stood on. A line was slithering down for them, a winch line, creaking on wheeled pullies.

Reaching out, they grabbed the line. Plissken turned his back to the big wall, waiting for the Duke as the President wrapped his hand around the thing.

"Hang on!" Plissken yelled and, with a jerk, the line started creaking back up the surface of the wall, taking the President with it.

Plissken looked down at his lifeclock. 0:01:33, 32, 31. He looked straight up. The line had made the top of the wall. Hands were helping Harker over the top. The line started back down again.

Suddenly a flash. It was the Duke, midway through the car forest. His rifle came up, firing. Bullets began exploding all around Plissken; he dove, rolling on the bridge, getting behind a dead car.

The aim went up, up for the guards. The President hit the ground, flattening himself on the wall top. One of the guards moved to shield him with his body and was picked off, his lifeless form falling the fifty feet to the bridge below. The other went spinning away, disappearing off the other side.

The Duke saw the dangling wire, went running for it. Plissken got back on his feet, waiting until the Duke got to his vantage point, then he jumped up on the hood of the Ford that was hiding him and dove onto the Duke from behind.

They went down hard, the rifle skittering away across the concrete. He was atop the Duke, the man stunned by the fall. Grabbing the back of the man's head, he slammed his forehead into the hard ground, a muffled cry issuing from the Duke's mouth.

There was no time.

Plissken climbed off the man and jumped back up on the retaining wall. He dove for the line on the big wall, catching it part of the way up.

He could hear the President calling from the top of the wall. "Pull it up," he was yelling. "Hurry."

With a jerk, he felt the line moving upward. He looked back down to the ground. The Duke was up on hands and knees, blood streaming from his forehead into his face and eyes. He was crawling toward the rifle.

Plissken looked up. There was a long way to go. He looked back down. The Duke had picked up the rifle and was wiping the blood out of his eyes so he could see. He was taking aim at a sitting duck.

His eyes traveled up again. The President, face set in a grimace, was leaning over the edge of the wall. He had one of the guard's rifles in his hands. He fired, pulling the automatic's trigger and not letting go.

The ground kicked up all around the Duke, and he exploded blood from twenty places on his immense frame. He danced with the bullets, as they kicked him, already dead, through a lifeless mazurka.

Finally he reeled on one foot, falling in a heap to the bloody pavement, and lay still.

The line got Plissken to the top. The President helped him over. "Thanks," he rasped, then, still holding the rope, went over the other side, motioning for the winch operators to bring him down.

As he descended, he saw Hauk looking up at him, then he saw a jeep carrying the old doctor and that damnable machine screech to a halt next to him.

Cronenberg jumped out of the jeep and hurried around to the machine, bringing out those long rubber hoses that had planted the bombs in him to begin with.

Ten feet from the ground, Plissken let go of the rope and dropped the remaining distance. He came down hard on his bad leg, buckling to the ground with the pain. He looked at his watch. 0:0:14, 13, 12 . . .

Struggling to his feet, he moved toward the machine, limping, falling, pulling himself along the ground with the power left in his arms. He got up, leaning on the jeep for support. Hauk rushed over to help him. He pushed him away.

Cronenberg had flipped on switches and was holding out the tubes. "Turn on the power." he told one of the blackbellies.

He was fading in and out, threatening to faint. The sound of a generator. The machine whirred to blathering life. He made it to Cronenberg. The man was smiling at him, preparing to place the tubes on his neck. Then, a hand pushing them away.

Hauk's voice. "The tape, Plissken."

Plissken put his hands in his pockets, digging, grasping. They wouldn't work right. He couldn't feel anything.

"Jesus!" Cronenberg said. "Five seconds, four, three . . ."

He pulled his hand out and it was there, lying in his feeble grasp. Hauk grabbed it and moved aside. Cronenberg's tubes on his neck, the man's weathered face showing concern.

The machine buzzed loudly, then was silent. It clicked off. Plissken's eyes drifted down to the watch. It read zeroes all the way across the dial.

Everything stopped. They all stared at one another—waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

"That's it," Cronenberg said at last.

XXIV

GETTIN’ EVEN

LATE EVENING

So, they took him back to the bunkers and cleaned and bandaged his wounds. They gave him a cup of coffee, his amnesty papers and a pack of cigarettes; then acted like he should slither back under whatever rock he crawled out of.

But it wasn’t that simple with Snake Plissken. He had looked for Hauk, but the man had disappeared right after the rescue and hadn’t reappeared since. He smiled to think that maybe the man was afraid of him, afraid of his death threat. Somehow, though, he didn’t think that was the case.

It didn’t matter anyway. A good bit of the anger had been whipped out of him.

He walked around in the chill night air, smoking one cigarette after another, figuring where he’d go now that he had survived hell. The President was huddled under a blanket by a mobile radio truck. A doctor stood beside him, just in case he wanted one. Hauk’s man, Rehme, was working on a tape recorder that was hooked up outside the truck.

The Snake wandered over to listen. Rehme was talking to a half-listening John Harker.

“We radioed ahead, sir,” he said in a patronizing tone. “They know the situation and they’re waiting for your broadcast.”

Plissken got up close. The secret servicemen that came from God knows where stiffened, hands reaching inside of sports jackets.

“It’s all right,” the President said, his eyes traveling up to meet Snake’s.

Plissken needed attention, and he needed sleep. But right then he needed to suck on that cigarette and play the game all the way out to the end.

“I want to thank you,” the President said. “Anything you want, just name it.”

“A moment of your time,” the Snake replied.

The President moved his head very slowly to glance at Rehme.

“Thirty seconds, sir,” the man said.

Harker shrugged. “Yes?”

Plissken took a drag, let it out. He wasn’t much with words. “We lost some people back on the bridge,” he said, and he couldn’t separate New York from Leningrad. They both formed some horrible amorphous lump in his mind. “They died getting you here. I . . . I just wondered how you felt about it.”

The man answered perfunctorily, immediately. “I’m very grateful,” he said.

Plissken didn’t know what he wanted to hear, but that wasn’t really it. There was a void, a vacuum that he desperately needed to fill if he was to survive as anything even resembling a human being. “Yeah?” he said.

The President spoke again, mechanical, like a speech. “The nation appreciates their sacrifice.”

Plissken just stared at him. The man had already forgotten about it, had already shuffled it into the back dusty corners of his brain where he’d never have to take it out and look at it again.

“I’m really sorry,” he said, looking at the tape recorder. “But I have to go.”

The Snake knew that he was out of his element with the man. He simply nodded and limped away. Then he saw Hauk, standing by the bunker. They locked eyes and Plissken made his way over to the man.

“Gonna kill me now. Snake?” he asked.

“I’m too tired,” Plissken replied. “Maybe later.”

The man’s eyes softened somewhat, like an ice cream cone melting in the hot, summer sun. “Did you . . . did you see . . .” He was stumbling with the words, and the Snake flashed to a crazy in an old, dark building.

“Yeah, I did,” Plissken answered. He started to tell him, started to tell him the truth, but he couldn’t get it out. There had been too much murder already, both mental and physical. “He’s okay,” he said. “He’s . . . happy where he is. Doesn’t need anything.”

Hauk could probably have not believed him if he was bent that way. But he wanted to believe. He wanted to. Plissken watched years of tension drain out of the man’s face. He nodded quickly, thankfully, and that was the end of it.

“I got another deal for you,” he told Plissken.

The Snake fixed him with his good eye, the pain in the bad eye

strangely dissipated.

Hauk took a breath and continued. “I want you to think about it while you’re taking a rest,” he said. Then, “I want to give you a job.”

The Snake’s cigarette had turned stale in his mouth. He threw it down and lit another. He didn’t know what he wanted out of life, but none of it included having anything more to do with Bob Hauk or the New York Penitentiary.

“We’d make one hell of a team, Snake.” Hauk said.

“The name’s *Plissken,*” he said evenly. Then he turned and limped away down a long row of bunkers. He never turned around again.

As he moved away, he could hear the President’s voice coming through loudspeakers mounted on the truck’s roof.

“. . . and though I am unable to attend this historic summit meeting, I present this tape recording in the hope that our nations may live together in peace.”

The Snake smiled as he heard the familiar strains of Cabbie’s tape blaring through the speakers.

> “Got the time for . . .
>
> gettin’ even.”

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the other cassette. Pulling a long strand of tape out of the plastic casing, he touched the glowing end of his cigarette to it. The thing sizzled, a small flame consuming the tape. He threw the burning thing away and walked, contented at last, into the cold, dark night.

His bad eye didn’t hurt anymore.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MIKE McQUAY teaches a science fiction writing course at Oklahoma Central State University. A graduate of the University of Dallas, he has served with the military in Vietnam, Thailand, Japan and the Philippines. McQuay is addicted to watching B movies on television late at night.